

INTERVIEW WITH DONALD WATSON ON SUNDAY 15 DECEMBER 2002

Recorded by George D Rodger

GDR: *To start off with, could you just say a few words, to check the sound level.*

DW: Before you ask me any questions, I'd like to make two brief statements, which I think are relevant.

The first is that, at the age of 92, speaking as a person who still has vivid recollections of the First World War, and even before that, you must feel perhaps that I'm past my best as a speaker, but the fact that I'm still here at all, nearly 20 years older than the average age of death of males in this country, suggests that there is something in long term veganism, particularly as I'm still able to do all the things I want to do, or most of them, able to climb mountains on fine days, and that I've gone through a long life virtually without pain or illness or any kind of medicine, orthodox or fringe, and even without dietary supplements, apart from those that nowadays find their way into proprietary vegan products like soya milk and so on, as a result of which, having outlived all my critics, I'm a keener vegan now even than I was when I started! And I do feel we're onto something really big! I don't want to turn this preliminary comment into a soliloquy, because I know you have questions to ask, but my overall feeling is one of great gratitude to veganism as I've interpreted it. I'll say no more about that.

Now the other comment that I think deserves to be recorded, I think this is something of enormous importance to all people who feel that Man should have a closer, and a kinder, affiliation with the rest of Creation, and this story concerns a wild bird, and the incident happened just outside this conservatory where we now sit. This is the story, and I hope that those who compile stories - unusual stories - of animal behaviour, and even, I would include, their gratitude, will agree it deserves a place in any such anthology.

Soon after we came here, in 1951, the front of this terrace was a lovely unbroken stretch of wall, covering this house and the end house. And living in the middle cottage, where we now sit (and which I had to sell to pay for all the expenses of conversion and removal and so on) was an elderly retired nurse who was dying of cancer, and she asked my wife and me whether we would have any objection if she had a conservatory built, so that she could spend her latter days sitting in the sun. Well, we hated the idea quite frankly, to lose the lovely straight stretch of the wall of the property going along the continuous terrace, but since life doesn't always give us easy choices, we said "Oh, go ahead, we don't mind". So she had the conservatory built, and I doubt very much if she ever sat in it - she died first. However, this was where the interesting bit starts.

The day after the conservatory was glazed, I was weeding the garden, and I found a dead blackbird - a male blackbird - whose flight path along the front of the terrace had been baulked by this new structure, with invisible glass. Well, we buried the blackbird, and, I don't know whether it was the next day, or the day after that, very very soon after that, we came and found a female blackbird - the brown one - lying in the same place, not dead, but virtually dead, with one eye hanging out, on what seemed to be like a little tube, it was hanging an inch, or an inch and a half, away from her face. Well, I suppose many humanitarians would have thought the best thing we can do in a case like this was to put it out of its misery, but my wife and I had never killed anything, so we lifted it up, carried it into the greenhouse, gave it a saucer of water, closed the door, and left it there for the night, knowing that no predator could reach it. We fully expected the next morning to find it dead of course. To our surprise, there it was, sitting up, the eye had gone back into place, we opened the door, and it flew out. That's not the end of the story! The really important part was still to come. A couple or so days later, my wife was hanging clothes out on the line, which went across the bottom side of our lawn. This blackbird flew parallel with the clothes line, and, in front of my wife, as it went by, it dipped in flight. Well, Dorothy came in, and told me this story, she said it must have remembered what we did and this was a "thank-you". And even that's not the end, because this was repeated time after time. My wife didn't hang clothes out every day, but, when she did, this blackbird, that was living somewhere in the garden, came along, did its little loop of gratitude, as it went by. Knowing, as we did, that birds and all creatures have feelings, it was news that even a bird, a wild bird, could show a sense of gratitude. And I've thought about it since. Perhaps this is why the stories of Saint Francis and other people, long ago, had such an intimate relationship with creatures they lived among. I think, if I've done justice to the story, that needs recording, even if more briefly than I have described it. Well, we're at the scene of that event! It was that window there!

GDR: This is George Rodger recording an interview with Donald Watson on the afternoon of Sunday 15th December 2002. What you've just heard was what Donald said when I asked him to say a few words for a sound check, but it was so fascinating I just let it run on. We'll now start the interview proper.

GDR: *Where and when were you born?*

DW: I was born on the 2nd of September, 1910, at Mexborough, in South Yorkshire.

GDR: *Tell me about your family.*

DW: My father was the headmaster of a big school at nearby Denaby Main. He started life as a poor farm boy, three miles away, and by hard work and study managed to become a headmaster, I believe at the age of about 30. And, although in every respect he was a good parent, he was orthodox in all his ways, so I was part of a meat-eating family, a church-going family, and part of the moral instruction we received as children (my brother, my sister and I) was that we must never steal, we must never trespass, but we may swear if we felt like it, but, only when we heard him swear, which we never did. That, very briefly, in a few words, comprises my family background. I could write a book on the whole subject, but, as I often feel, who on earth would be remotely interested in it now, when people are living from day to day with pressing economic problems, feeling their various body parts from day to day, for suspected lumps which shouldn't be there, questioning everything that's been traditionally accepted, chiefly through religion, as being true and honest and of good report. Well, I don't know whether further questions will concern that, but they're hardly relevant to veganism, which I suppose the bulk of your questions will relate to.

GDR: *Would you like to say any more about your childhood?*

DW: This is a story - I can only give it in precis, otherwise it will take the whole of the afternoon to report, but, very briefly:

I suppose I was one of millions of children with a very similar, orthodox, background, and one of my earliest recollections in life was being taken for holidays to the little farm where my father had been born. It was run by my grandmother and her son, George, who was the elder son of the family and therefore inherited the farm. And my first impression of those holidays was one of heaven. As a little boy, living in a town, I was surrounded by interesting animals. There was the big Shire horse, who pulled the plough. There was a horse of lighter build, that pulled the trap, which in those days was the equivalent of the modern motor car, which took my granny into local markets to sell her butter and eggs. There were the cows, there were the pigs, there were no sheep on the farm - they lived in a field hundreds of yards away. There were hens, there was a cockerel, there were two cats, the farm dog, Rover, and all these creatures gave me an insight into the kind of life I'd never seen before, and I realised that they all "gave" something. The farm horse pulled the plough, the lighter built horse pulled the trap and the wagonette, which was a bigger wagon, carrying at least half a dozen ladies to market with their butter and eggs every Saturday. The cows "gave" milk, the hens "gave" eggs, the cockerel was a useful "alarm clock" - I didn't realise at that time that he had another function too!

The sheep, I knew, "gave" wool and my impression was one of heaven, especially since my granny used to allow me to help make the butter - I turned the churn and, when she patted the butter into little rolls, ready for the market, and placed the butter on the sheet of muslin, she allowed me to wield the little gadget across, which had some leaf patterns on the wheel, which was transferred to the butter, and after this had finished, the buttermilk was put in a separate receptacle and added with all the kitchen waste and some meal from a bag, and it was fed to the pigs. The whole structure, by the way, I learned had been built by one of my ancestors, several generations before, who had six daughters, and they made the bricks in moulds from local clay, mixed with straw, and they baked them on huge wood fires, to build the house. My great-great-grandfather had designed it, no planning permission needed of course in those days and I could draw a plan of that farm now and, as an example of functional planning, I can't fault it.

The toilet was an antiquated affair. It was a structure in wood, it was an earth closet of course, with a raised section, with two holes in the top, and then a lower section, with three holes, for children. And the contents deposited there periodically were shovelled out from the back, by my Uncle George, who wheeled them all to a part of the garden, not the part where food was being grown, but a part where the food would be grown in years to come. Ecologically, this was the system that had prevailed for centuries, in tens of thousands of little farms, where I believe about three quarters of the population of this country, and probably of others, made their living. I could never understand what the pigs did - all the other animals "gave" something, but I couldn't for the life of me see what the pigs "gave", and they seemed - there were usually two - such friendly creatures, always glad to see me, and grateful for almost anything that was thrown to them in the sty. Well, the day came when I came downstairs for breakfast, and Granny wasn't alone in the kitchen - there were two women there I'd never seen before, and they were very busy boiling an enormous amount of water, one pan after another, on the fire. What was all this about? Soon after, I saw two men cross the path in front of the kitchen window, carrying what seemed to be like a trestle, with handles on each end, and they took it through to the little yard where the pigsty was. It wasn't long before the business of killing one of the pigs began. No attempt was made to keep me away from the scene, I just went there, full of interest, to see what all this was about. And I still have vivid recollections of the whole process from start to finish, including all the screams of course, which were only feet away from where this pig's companion still lived. And then, when the pig had finally expired, the women came out, one after another, with buckets of this scalding water, and the body of the pig was scraped - all the hairs were taken away.

The thing that shocked me, along with the chief impact of the whole setup, was that my Uncle George, of whom I thought very highly, was part of the crew, and I suppose at that point I decided that farms, and uncles, had to be re-assessed. They weren't all they seemed to be, on the face of it, to a little, hitherto uninformed boy. And it followed that this idyllic scene was nothing more than Death Row. A Death Row where every creature's days were numbered by the point at which it was no longer of service to human beings. There is much more I could say about my life on the farm. I remember at harvest time, when a field was due to be mown, a man used to go round with a scythe, opening it up, that meant making a space near the hedge, where the horse that would pull the reaper could go without trampling on the corn. And then the reaper came - I heard that there was a new machine, called a binder, which automatically collected the straws into sheaves, and threw them out - but my uncle wasn't rich enough to have one of those. He just had the old-fashioned reaper. And, as the reaper went round, the standing corn became smaller and smaller and at that point the farm hands came with their guns because the rabbits had all been driven into this ever-diminishing area of safety until there was none left and then they fled, and of course they were shot. Another aspect of idyllic family life that didn't seem all that it had been cracked up to be, and afterwards of course the sheaves of corn were all stacked and the farmers hoped for two or three days of fine weather so that the rain wouldn't come and make the wheat wet so that it sprouted. They had to get it into a straw stack as quickly as possible. Well, the straw stack was built on a structure of old tree branches and logs to keep it off the ground and when it was finally built, it was thatched, not with the same care as a cottage of course, but there were no plastic sheets in those days. And this straw stack was absolutely heaven for mice - they were free from predators, they were warm, they had a food supply. Until threshing day came of course, by which time they'd all had their families, and as the sheaves of corn were forked off, and thrown into the thresher, everyone available was there with their sticks, to kill the mice and the young mice as they lay there in their nests. I'm told that, in the old days, sparrow pie was one of the national dishes among the peasants, the reason being the easy way by which they got the sparrows - it was to put a net round the straw stack, and, as they fluttered out, they were killed. And they got enough sparrows to make a pie quite quickly. And so the story goes on, as our past on which our present civilisation is built. And, quite early in life, I came to the conclusion that, if I was to report on Man's progress, I had to settle for the comment beloved of schoolteachers: "could do better". And from that, The Vegan Society was formed. Well, that's a bit of the story and then going back home, I lived at home for 21 years. In the whole of that time, I never heard a word, from my parents, or from my grandparents, or from my 22 uncles and aunts, or my 16 cousins, or my teachers or my vicar, on anything remotely associated with any duties we may have to what the religious people call "God's Creation".

GDR: *So that was your childhood. Would you like to go on and say something about your adolescent years and your early adult life?*

DW: Oh yes. That's another story entirely. When I was 14, my father asked me what I wanted to do. And I didn't say anything, I was afraid of offending him, because my older brother had been to college and become a teacher and there was nothing I wanted to do more than make things. I wanted to be a woodworker. And it took a long time before I plucked up enough courage to tell him this. The result was that, since I'd never been happy at school, I went to be an apprentice with my uncle in a little village three miles away. And there I got an insight into village life which strengthened all my earlier convictions about our relationship with the rest of Creation. Our workshop was down a yard adjacent to the local inn and the innkeeper had been the village butcher, and living there was the old bachelor who had been his assistant, I suppose for most of his life. And old Albert spent his days looking after the hens and the geese and a few pigs and a little garden. He kept his corn bin in our workshop. And he also used the workshop to kill the hens - he brought them in every week or so, wrung their necks, hung them up on a row of pegs and left them there, fluttering until they died. Well, among the denizens of this farmyard was a gander, to whom I became quite attached. It used to come into the workshop, as I was having my lunch, sitting on the sawing stool, it would share my lunch with me, and we became very friendly. I've still got a photograph of him somewhere. Well, one day, after I suppose two or three years, old Albert came into the workshop with this gander under his arm and then put the body between his legs and the gander was rebelling, not knowing what was going to happen, and I heard Albert say "Not this time, boy". The gander went the same way as all the hens, and he was hung up, fluttering for I suppose the best part of five minutes, and that was the end of my friendship with him. On another occasion, when Albert was called in by one of his friends to kill a pig, he came into the shop and said to my uncle (in broad Yorkshire), "Would t'lad (me) give them a hand with this awk'urd pig?" This "awk'urd pig" was rebelling, not surprisingly, at being killed. My uncle, who knew that I was a vegetarian, he said "No - my lad doesn't believe in murder". So I was let off that! This town where I lived, like all other towns at that time, had a succession of butchers' shops along the main road, about four in half a mile. I can remember Wagstaffs, Law's, Biggin's, Beaumont's; Hillerby's, the fishmongers, who also sold rabbits, and all these butchers did their own killing. They had two doors alongside their shop, and, as the animals were delivered, they went in and the doors closed behind them. And Mrs Biggins once said to my mother, who traded there, since we were meat-eaters, in her broad Yorkshire, "T'little calves do cry when Charlie (her husband) kills 'em".

As I went to school each morning, on many mornings, a van would arrive at Law's, the pork butchers, with two or three pigs - they needed those for the day's supply - and they were pulled out, with their tails, squealing, and pushed up the passage. And so, several of the school staff passed that way on their way to school and I remember on one of my reports the French mistress gave a very cutting comment, "He does not even know his verbs!" And I thought, on reading this, "No, and she does not even know what is happening down the road! Or, if she does know, she doesn't care."

That was the very brief background of my upbringing. I must add just one other thing - the vicar, a Dr Briggs, who was a Doctor of Divinity (Mexborough was very proud to have a Doctor of Divinity as a vicar) ran a Bible Class for youths, boys by the way, not girls, every Sunday afternoon, and I was one of the youths who went to this Bible Class, and the only reference he ever made as a Doctor of Divinity to any kind of compassion for the Animal Kingdom was that if we did collect birds' eggs, we were to take only one from each nest. That just shows how far we've gone in the last 70 or 80 years. If any vicar now said that, he'd soon find himself before the Court, wouldn't he?

GDR: You did, in fact, train as a woodworker, which you said just now was your ambition, and you worked at that for some time. How and why did you switch to teaching, as you did later on?

DW: Oh, that's an easy one! When I was 21, and due to become a craftsman, I presumed for the rest of my life, we found ourselves in the middle of an economic slump, which went on for several years in the early 1930's. And millions of people had no work. And I discovered that craftsmen could become woodwork teachers without going to college by qualifying through City and Guilds, providing they became of an acceptable standard. So, I enrolled. I took correspondence courses, I passed my first examination, which qualified me to teach for three years, during which time I was expected to take the final, which would give me the same status as a college-trained teacher. I don't think I found any difficulty in this, because during the whole of my adolescence, I was reading books - "The Origin of Species", Gilbert White's "Natural History of Selborne", Hudson's "A Shepherd's Life", Dickens' "The Old Curiosity Shop". My main problem was maths, but with a bit of trouble I managed it and I got a job in Leicestershire as a peripatetic teacher, teaching all over the county, going there by bike, by the way, sometimes leaving home at half past six to reach distant places like Ashby-de-la-Zouche and Castle Donington, Shepshed, Hugglescote, Cosby, Hinckley, Sileby - the list goes on. By the way I was claiming bus fares, quite legitimately, and the bus fares came to nearly half my wage, which helped. And after three years of this I was appointed to a new school on the outskirts of Leicester, where life became very much easier. And then, I liked the job so much, I never tried to get any kind of promotion, because I couldn't think of a more useful job than training what was, over the years, thousands of boys in the art of using tools. But I did move to do the same job here in Keswick.

And when I became sixty I felt so fit and able that I couldn't think of retiring, so I kept on for another three years, after which I took a job for seven years, as a guided walks leader, when I led parties of visitors to Keswick out on the fells. There was no charge in those days - they charge five pounds a time now, I believe, and sometimes the parties numbered as many as seventy. And over the summer and autumn, we covered about five hundred miles at least. And I suppose I took out nearly a thousand people. I must be in photograph albums in many parts of the world.

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

DW: Oh, am I? I did another calculation this morning, with the help of my calculator, and I found out that I'd lived nearly 34,000 days, and I had a strange thought. Since I must die in the next few years I thought 33,600 times I've gone to sleep at night and in a way I've died, always assuming I'm going to wake up again, and the day must come when I won't, and I thought, what a crowning glory that must be for anyone who's lived without illness or pain, and kept out of police hands, by the way, to just go to sleep one day, or one night, and not wake up, as we all do, every day of our lives.

GDR: So you've lived all those thousands of days - to what do you attribute your long life? Is it because of being vegan, or is it because of choosing the right parents, or is it just good luck?

DW: I can answer that in several ways, but, twice a year, I go to a dentist in Bangor in North Wales. We lived down there, nursing my sister-in-law for three years and we got in with this dentist - who is a very good dentist. I go for my checkup, and last time I went, he asked if I minded filling up a form - apparently dentists now have to be very careful how they administer anything to patients, in case it militates against any medicines they might be taking - and this form was a long form and it went "Do you ever have this or that or the other", and I kept putting ticks under the "no"s, right down to the bottom, and it was a long row of "no"s. And my dentist looked at this and said "I wish I had more customers like you! To what do you attribute it?" I said, "Well, that's a long story, but 57 years ago, 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." And that must be part of the answer to the question, because so many people are running towards what I see as suicide.

They're performing habits which everyone knows are dangerous, and I really believe that the commonest cause of death now in this and several other countries, is slow suicide, by people doing what they, and every authority in every school of medicine, is agreed to be wrong, smoking, taking alcohol, turning night into day, promiscuity, sleeplessness, lack of exercise, you know I recently made a list, it was about twelve reasons that came into my mind, straight away.

"When everyone runs, stand still." And, in that sense, although I've done a lot of travelling about, mainly by bicycle, and on foot, I've been standing still.

Veganism, of course, probably leads all the rest, because I've always accepted that Man's greatest mistake throughout all recorded history, is through trying to turn himself into a carnivore, which is absolutely contrary to natural law. As long ago as 1863, T H Huxley wrote his book, "Man's Place In Nature", in which he listed all the reasons where Man differs from the carnivores and is similar in his anatomy and in his habits to those of the anthropoid apes. The structure of our body and all the juices that create this miraculous process of digestion are those of a frugivore. 200 years before Huxley wrote his book, which must be one of the most significant books on medicine ever written, John Ray said very much the same thing. So, we've had plenty of sound, incontrovertible evidence to work on and, although, in 1944, the few of us who were working to form this new movement, felt we were the first out on the frozen pond, as it were, and wondered whether the ice would hold, and everything that's happened in the 60 years since has proved that all our hopes and precepts and aspirations have been fulfilled.

GDR: *You've already mentioned that you were a vegetarian when you were a lad. When, and why, did you first become a vegetarian, and at what age?*

DW: It was a New Year Resolution in 1924. Did you ever hear anyone say there's no point in making New Year Resolutions because they're always broken? You can quote me as an exception to the rule, because, since 1924, I've never eaten any meat, or fish. How long ago is that - 78 years is it? 78 years!

GDR: *Of course, you invented the term "vegan" in 1944, which was 20 years after that Resolution, but you had already been a vegan for two or three years before that. So why did you actually go vegan?*

DW: A year or two before the Society was formed, I was corresponding with a very small number of people, scattered far and wide. Leslie Cross, who founded the Plant Milk Society, was a great friend of mine. He died comparatively early, well, in his early 70s, I think, and, in a letter he sent me, shortly before he died, he mentioned that, as a child, he'd fallen heavily from a gate and the authorities thought he might not recover and, I think, if he had an early death for a vegan, it may have been the consequence of that. He was certainly one of the outstanding people who have served the movement and, in retirement, he went up and down the country, giving his lecture, "Milk of Human Kindness" - all voluntarily of course, paying his own expenses, and co-ordinating Frey Ellis and others, medical people who were interested in the idea of creating a plant milk that was acceptable - some of the earlier efforts were pretty crude! But it was not until 1965 that my great friend, Arthur Ling, who has devoted most of his adult life to creating and propagating the vegan idea, especially with regard to dairy produce, felt able to market an acceptable alternative to cows' milk. And of course, he's gone on from there, and, apart from running the Plamil firm, he's taking a great interest in the feeding of vegan infants. Because, of course, if any diet fails to produce healthy children, well, we must find a reason for it, and proceed from there, not taking "no" for an answer. But now, thanks to Arthur's work and those of many others, we've reached a point where the only safe way to rear children is on a vegan diet, which obviously must conform to a few well-proved requirements, and that's why Plamil and certain other vegan proprietary products now are fortified with vitamin B12, which, although it's a vitamin that we need an infinitesimally small amount of, we must have, and some people have lost the capacity to produce it in their own gut, so now we feel that, since B12 is a vegan product, produced quite cheaply fortunately, unlike some of our modern wonder drugs, so-called, we take it as part and parcel of our normal food intake. I would bracket, of all the many people who have subscribed to the vegan cause, I hesitate to single out anyone, but I would say Leslie Cross and Arthur Ling must be put in the records as being the two outstanding, faithful, contributors to our cause. I hesitate to include my own name, as the Society's obstetrician; I leave it to others to say whether I made a good job there, but I think I must have done, because, in the two years before we decided to officially form a democratic Society, I literally ran the show. I was the Secretary, the Treasurer, the Auditor, and the Banker, not that we'd ever very much to bank, in fact the flow of money very often went the other way, and I remember on one occasion, after I'd produced my first duplicated copy of the "Vegan News", which had four pages, out of the blue someone sent me two pounds, which was eight times the contributions of five shillings I was charging as the annual fee to be informed about the progress that was being made.

And with that two pounds I rushed out and bought enough foolscap copying paper to enable me to enlarge the "Vegan News" to twelve pages. And, reading them recently, I think that these must now be what we might call "The Dead Sea Scrolls" of the vegan movement, because they describe how the whole idea was started, at a most difficult time. And, from the response I had, thousands of letters, sometimes as many as 30 or 40 a day, I sometimes feel that we had reached a watershed and if I hadn't formed the Society, someone else may have done it, very soon, although it may have had a different name. I did appeal to my readers to suggest what the name might be, and I had a list of very bizarre suggestions, which some people may already have heard of - I won't list them now - but, in an inspired moment, I settled for the word "vegan", which was immediately accepted and, over the years, became part of our language and is now in almost every world dictionary, I suppose.

GDR: That's very interesting stuff about the early days of the Society. Can you tell me why you, yourself, first decided to give up on all animal products - in other words, became vegan, before the word was invented?

DW: Well, I think if an open-minded, honest person pursues a course long enough, and listens to all the criticisms, and in one's own mind can satisfactorily meet all the criticisms against that idea, sooner or later one's resistance against what one sees as evil tradition has to be discarded. About the time the Vegan Society was formed, Archbishop Lang, the Archbishop of Canterbury, said, or wrote, or reminded his flock, of what I think was a great truth, that, throughout history, good and devout people have pursued evil practices, in the firm belief that they were doing nothing wrong. And I thought, well, that applies to what I'm doing. I seem to be taking on the world virtually single-handed, with no recognised qualifications other than a conviction that, with all the conceit I can muster, I am right, and they're all wrong! It's a dangerous state of mind, but one which, sooner or later, one can't dispel, and one has to go that way. I remember one of the sayings that convinced me at the time when I was in the throes of what I saw as a struggle, I read somewhere that the Norwegian poet and dramatist, Ibsen, had said, "The strongest man in the world is the man who can stand alone", and I thought that the way people are worn down by the traditions of the cultures in which they've been born, this must be a great truth. Ibsen died in 1906, four years before I was born, and I thought what better service can I give to this man who wrote such a great truth than include it in my answer to any appropriate question that I might now be asked. So I say, "Well said, Ibsen!"

GDR: *In addition to being vegan, I believe you're a lifelong teetotaller, a lifelong non-smoker. . .*

DW: I have tasted wine, and I once tasted champagne, at a wedding, and I thought it was poor stuff, compared with grape or apple juice, but I've never tasted beer. I suppose there are very few men in this part of the world who can say they've never tasted beer, and I must have saved quite a lot of money - and quite a lot of tax!

GDR: *You were also, I believe, a conscientious objector during the Second World War, and a few other things of principle, and I just wanted to ask you, one at a time, how all these relate to your veganism. We'll start with teetotalism, since you've already started on it - how does the following relate to your veganism - being a lifelong teetotaller?*

DW: I don't think that links particularly with the ethics of veganism, especially since one can now buy wines that are vegan, not treated with a fish product to make them clear. I think it was more that I'd seen so many people destroyed by alcohol that I felt this was a slippery slope that, as a sensible chap, I'd better not put my foot on it.

GDR: *In the same way, can you comment on being a non-smoker in relation to veganism?*

DW: Well, I always thought that smoking was so utterly daft - a person with a little fire hanging out of their mouth. It was neither food nor drink, and, although in those days there wasn't strong medical evidence, I thought to draw chemically-loaded gases into the lungs couldn't possibly be doing them any good. Many doctors smoked, in fact one or two even said it was beneficial, because it killed germs. Well, now, all that nonsense has gone, and we know that tobacco is a killer and sensible people don't do it. And morally-inclined people don't inflict it upon other people. I sometimes think now we're protecting children against the evils of paedophiles and it is still legal, unbelievably legal, for a pregnant woman to smoke, and inflict this poison on an unborn child, impairing it probably for life. I think, to use a religious expression, we must accept that the physical body is the "temple of the spirit". It mustn't be abused in any way. Everything we do must be to try to preserve it and feed it properly and give it everything that's necessary to prosper and live as long as possible so that, whatever the purpose of life is, we fulfil it to the best of our abilities.

You did ask me a question earlier about conscientious objection. I'd like to mention, very briefly, it isn't really the subject of this interview, that vegetarians, and vegans, were placed in a dreadful position at the beginning of the last War. We were faced with an evil regime that was executing people who didn't fully agree with the Nazi philosophy. They were exterminating the Jews by the million.

And we had to decide whether to fight in the only way that seemed practical, to fight this evil, and overcome it in the hope that something better would result, although it never had from previous wars, and my own feeling was that, if I enrol, and I'm allotted to any branch of the Services, I immediately become liable to military law. Suppose they direct me to work in a slaughterhouse? Or anywhere else, where I'm expected to conform to orders from above. What do I do? I refuse, I'm put on a charge of insubordination, and I'm faced with punishment, goodness knows what. I knew what happened to "awk'urd" types like that in the First World War, I think 307 of them were shot! And I thought, surely since Churchill had said there was to be no witch hunt of conscientious objectors, I thought, well, there must be a place somewhere during this crisis, where I can work for the life of the nation, and not kill people I'd never met, and leave their descendants bereaved, and, as it turned out, bomb cities like Dresden where 50,000 people died in one raid and the bodies had to be piled in the streets and burnt. My great friend Douglas Eld, who was a keen member of the Leicester Vegetarian Society, of which I was the Secretary, was so moved by the evil stories of what the Nazis were doing, that he renounced his pacifism and joined up. And he joined a bombing crew and he was one of the thousands who never came back. And so was a keen member of my night school in Leicester, Clifford Ginetta; he never came back. And my school friend, Harold Platt, he joined up and he never came back. And my cousin John Smith, died in the last week of the war. He wasn't a conscientious objector, or a vegetarian, he was just one of the millions who paid the price of war. It was a terrible dilemma for anyone with high principles to see thousands, millions of people, killed, because the whole idea was so mad that Man should still, at this late stage in his evolution, be trying to solve his problems by this evil method. But that was the dilemma, so, after much thought, for right or wrong, I became a CO. My terms for being given this privilege, which it was, of course, was that my salary as a teacher was reduced to two pounds a week - the pay of the lowest-serving member of the Forces, who were, of course, fed and clothed. My night school pay was stopped too, because the Leicester City Council said that the terms were that I mustn't have more than two pounds a week. Well, as a thrifty young man, I'd saved 500 pounds, which was a lot of money in those days, and so, with the two pounds a week, and this 500 pounds, I was able to stagger my way through the war without getting into debt. I carried on with the night school, which was always filled by men, many of them working in the shadow factories on good money. (The shadow factories where bits and pieces were made to be assembled elsewhere into tanks and guns and whatever. No-one was supposed to know what these shadow factories were making, in case they were bombed.) It was difficult for me to serve all these people on big money, and, among all the rest, there were evacuees from London and there were two men sent for occupational therapy. They'd been rescued at death's door from the Burma railway, and they were as near to death as I'd ever seen anyone - they could hardly speak, and over the weeks and the months, they gradually came back to life and started making simple articles.

I was also in the AFS - the Auxiliary Fire Service - where, on two days a week, I had to go down and spend the night at the Granby Halls, in my full fireman's regalia, in case we had a bombing raid. Fortunately we didn't. The raid on Coventry, I understand, was intended to be on Leicester, but Leicester, in a valley, or a saucer-shaped dent in the landscape, filled with mist, on the night of the Coventry raid, and the planes that flew over Leicester thought it was a lake. They thought it was Swithland Reservoir. So poor Coventry had the raid that was intended for Leicester. And if it had been Leicester, I might not have been here today. It's a longer story than that, but that, very briefly, is the dilemma. And I'm left with the thought how lucky these young people are today not to have this terrible choice to make, of whether they should go to war or not. War as we knew it then, of course, will never return, it will be a different kind of war, push-button, where civilians will be as much in it as anyone else for much of the time.

GDR: How did being a Conscientious Objector affect your working and social life?

DW: Veganism always had an effect on my social life. I think that's an inevitable price we had to pay and which people, especially young people, have to pay today. But, if one is going to be out of step with all the catering that is done for people who are different from oneself, one must accept a certain amount of excommunication, as it were, from the rest of society - that is where I think the Vegan Contacts work is so absolutely essential, why vegans, especially those who live isolated from other vegans, must have some contact with the rest of our movement, which is now, of course, an ever-growing world movement, I like to think the greatest movement that ever was! Because it's the only one, now, that can save Mankind. All the lesser movements for doing good work in themselves, in a limited sphere, are only, to use the common cliché, like the people re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, instead of helping us to guide the searchlight on the iceberg which is going to be the end of the whole show. And, when I think that the world population, which was about 2 billion people in 1944, is now more than 6 billion people, in spite of all the losses in war, disease, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tidal waves, all the things that wipe out people by the tens of thousands. It has still become this astronomical explosion of over 6 billion, along with, I would say, a corresponding explosion of animals to feed most of them. And those animals are there, fed on food that should be growing for the Third World, where people are having big families, because they have to, they've no social security, they have to have many children because many of them in every family are likely to die and that, I think, may be the reason for this explosion. Well, we know that, throughout history, nature rebels against any species that becomes too numerous, usually by food shortage, or by disease, both of which are now rampaging ahead in the human community without - I won't say without a thought - but without anyone except the vegans having a possible solution to this crisis.

AIDS, to mention just one, is now affecting a third of the population in many African countries and spreading to other countries. This is the Black Death of our modern age and no-one knows where it's going to stop. Apart from that I might add all the diseases that are infecting Man from eating animal food, with its ever-growing list of diseases, so that in parts of the world, including our own, even farming is now under such threat that another visitation of foot and mouth disease or BSE, is still so frightening that farmers daren't risk it - they can't be insured against this enormous risk. So livestock farming is on the way out, as we've always known it, and, looking on the bright side, this could, in a properly organised world, create a labour force big enough to do all the jobs that we so desperately need doing - coping with drought, coping with floods, coping with disease, of course. And perhaps, most critical of all, reforestation, stopping the ever-growing growth of the deserts and the ever-decreasing amount of fertile land on which Man lives and we know now that even the so-called harvest of the seas, through Man's avarice, interfering in a region where he has no business to go, has reached such a point of depletion that many species have almost become extinct. Again, one must admit, leading to unemployment of all the people employed in the fishing industry, but one is reminded of the reply given by somebody when slavery was abolished and one of the people against abolition said "What on earth is going to happen to the families of the people who make the whips, if slavery is abolished?" Well, the obvious answer to that - they are given more profitable and humane work to do! And that is the great challenge facing Mankind. Carrying on St-Barbe Baker's work - "Men of the Trees", restoring the deserts, so that we don't get these great areas of land where the temperature rises and it upsets the whole weather pattern that spreads throughout the world, whereas a world covered with trees would have a more controlled climate, one that was safer, and sustainable, in which Man could work out his destiny. Oh - I'm turning it into a soliloquy, aren't I? I have to say, next question.

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

DW: I never had very deep ones. Some theologians, I believe, think that Christ was an Essene. And if he was an Essene, 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, which, as I see it, is the only useful part of what religion has to offer and, sad as it seems, I doubt if we still have to enrol our first priest as a member of the Vegan Society. I understand that there are now more vegans sitting down to Sunday lunch than there are Anglicans attending Sunday morning service. That is the way things are moving. I also think that Anglicans should rejoice at this good news that somebody at least is practising the essential element in the Christian religion - compassion.

When I received all my thousands of letters in the years preceding the formation of the Society, I don't remember ever having one from any student or lecturer at a university. And I think, at that time, about two percent of our most intelligent youths were going on to university. I thought, "What am I up against here? Here are the top two percent of the people I'd like to convert and they aren't even interested in this idea!" My letters came from atheists and agnostics and people who couldn't care less about any of the religions. I think the only vicar who ever wrote a book on the subject was Holmes Gore, who wrote his excellent book, "These We Have not Loved". Good for him! But, if any priest of any denomination wants to distinguish himself - or, nowadays I must add "herself" - the opportunity is open for them to join the vegan movement and really express the core element of what they are professing to stand for. I think we can say to the religious movement, "Yes, the meek will inherit the Earth, if anyone is going to, because the violent people will exterminate themselves, and not before long, as things are going."

GDR: I think, in fairness, I should remind you of religious organisations like The Order Of The Cross, The Followers Of The Way, these are religions which are very much in line with the vegan philosophy.

DW: When I was in Leicester, running the Leicester Vegetarian Society, I had several members of The Order Of The Cross among my members, including our Chairman. I went to one or two of their meetings. Todd Ferrier, their leader, was making a lifetime job of trying to introduce other Christians into this idea of spreading the Gospel, but they were all vegetarians, not one was a vegan. In fact, at that time I think I was the only one, in Leicester anyway. And, as the vegan idea developed, we saw, or some of us did, that, although vegetarianism was a very useful "stepping-stone" to veganism, and one which we had all used to get to where we were, unless the consumption of dairy produce was limited, it could be an even more cruel diet than the orthodox diet, where the meat came from a large animal like a cow which was feeding one meat-eater for a year or two, whereas the milk drinkers - they were going back to the cow suckling (what a bizarre idea that is!) at virtually every meal and claiming to be leading the way to a more humane life! So, although I'm still a member of the Vegetarian Society, I send my one pound fifty a month by direct debit, I do so to keep in touch with the movement, because I came from it and I am tremendously interested to be kept informed about the way it's moving and I was delighted to learn recently, at the IVU Conference in Edinburgh, that the diet was a vegan diet and that the delegates had no choice. That is the influence of the vegan idea. This little seed which I planted 60 years ago, and has been worked on by now thousands of people ever since, is making its presence felt in a world that is dying for salvation, to use again the religious expression.

Holman Hunt's famous picture, "The Light Of The World", shows the Christian sitting beside the globe, implying that Christianity was the only way there. Well, if it's the form of Christianity that the Essenes knew, we'll say "yes". Holman Hunt sent a famous message - veganism!

GDR: *I think you may consider you've already answered this question, but to what extent do you think your veganism relates to your still being alive and healthy at the age of 92? .*

DW: Well, again I repeat what I said earlier, an hour ago: "When everyone runs, stand still." That, one day, will be out-of-date, because, when everyone is running towards veganism, I wouldn't say "Stand still"!

GDR: *What do you find most difficult about being vegan?*

DW: Well, I suppose it is the social aspect. Excommunicating myself from that part of life where people meet to eat, and the only way this problem can be eased is by having veganism more and more acceptable in guest houses, hotels, wherever one goes, until one hopes one day it will become the norm.

GDR: *And, the other side of the coin. What do you find easiest about being vegan?*

DW: Easiest? I suppose it must be the great advantage of having a clear conscience and believing that scientists must now accept conscience as part of the scientific equation. A stricken conscience is not a health measure for anyone. We have to believe our finer feelings of this guilt and proceed from there as stronger men and women. Whenever I look across a graveyard and see all the stones, I think what enormous agony all the people who are buried there - most unnecessary agony - must have gone through during their lives and all the herds of cattle and flocks of sheep and shoals of fish went into the lives of every one of them to keep their little show on the road, believing, as Lang said, they were doing nothing wrong.

The tragedy of the whole existence of Mankind is that, long ago, Man went from his home in Africa, into climes where he had to eat animal food to keep himself alive, and then he invented weapons, to kill animals, to safeguard his food supply, and then he invented fire, to make the unnatural food edible, and then he invented the means of domesticating animals, to further safeguard his unnatural food supply and so the great mistake went on until now, of course, we have refrigeration and other methods of food preservation, to make animal food available, with our systems of transport, anywhere in the world. Not that vegan food can't be taken anywhere in the world - it can, now, daily. Wherever Man lives, he can have a vegan diet.

When I went to be an apprentice woodworker, one of the first things I learnt was the enormous difference between the hardness and the toughness of wood from slow-growing trees like oak, and all the other hardwoods, compared with that from fast-growing trees like spruce. And I did think, and I have thought, many times, afterwards, slow-growing wood can be compared to slow-growing animals. If we make an animal, especially in its young days, grow faster than the rate nature had planned, the cells are bigger, and the flesh is less durable and that is precisely what happens if we feed babies on milk with a higher protein content than mother's milk. We get big, bouncing babies, or six-foot six teenagers, as we see now, walking our streets, bodies that are bigger than nature ever intended which, throughout the ages, seems to have been about between five feet and five feet six, and, will these bodies that have been subjected to this accelerated unnatural growth stand the test of time? Like oak does, compared with pine. I'm not a scientist, all my theories about veganism have been developed from using my conscience and my commonsense and my observation of events that have been happening all around me and so often my conclusion has contested with that of tradition. I remember one of the thousands of boys I taught - early in my career, in Leicester - frequently if I told him anything, he would look up at me and say, "How d'you make that out, Sir?" I often wonder where that boy finished up in life - he must have gone far. He wasn't accepting what the teacher said, he wanted it saying another way round, or a simpler way, or stronger proof, before he was willing to accept. "How d'you make that out, Sir?" I'll never forget that boy.

GDR: I know you have a fairly large garden and several compost bins. How important has gardening been in your life?

DW: Well, shall I tell you how it started? I was always keen on growing things - I thought it was magic to put something in the ground and not do anything else except look at that bit of ground, day after day, until, as if by magic, something had grown. And I remember the house where I was born, one of a row in South Yorkshire, had a little back garden about the area of this conservatory where we are now sitting. It was surrounded by bricks, put on end, forming a zig-zag pattern, as people did in those days and, every year, my mother used to buy a packet of Virginia stock seed, and she let me scatter these seeds right round the border. And, after a week or two, little green sprouts seemed to appear and then, suddenly, the first flower appeared. Well, Virginian stocks, as you know, are little flowers that come in many colours, white, blue, red and perhaps other colours too. I shall never forget going in the house and announcing the great news that the first Virginian stock was in flower. That's how my gardening started.

I never became a flower gardener - I was more attracted to the more practical side of gardening, which was growing food, especially compost-grown food, and among my many friends in Leicester was a young man, a member of my Vegetarian Society, his name was Tom Rawls, and he had several theories, and one of them was, if you want anything, don't ask how you're going to get the money to buy it, visualise it, and, if you visualise it strongly enough, it will come about. I thought, well, as a practical man, this seems a bit far-fetched, but I did visualise having a kitchen garden outside my back door, so that I didn't have to cross Leicester to an allotment which a friend let me use. And, when the crops matured, I had to wheel them back four miles from Thurmaston, right across Leicester, to the other side of the city, and I was so keen on getting this food, apart from not having to buy it (because, remember, I was on two pounds a week), that I did it for, certainly, two or three years, and then, lo and behold, when I was lucky enough to get a job in Keswick, which I think must be one of the loveliest places in the world, I also got a big house - not that we wanted a big house, we wanted a big garden, but it had an acre of garden with it, including an orchard, and a lawn, and a kitchen garden, which was walled on two sides, which was a dream come true, and I thought of Tom, I said, Tom first told me about visualising what I wanted, and I did, and it's come true! And, another thing, based on my comments about religion, my vicar, as a young man, when I went to his Bible Class, told us one day, "There's nothing wrong with inventing your own prayers - don't limit your prayers to those in the Prayer Book. If you can think of any prayers that you would like to see fulfilled, just invent one, and say it, as often as you think appropriate."

So I went away with this idea, I thought, fair enough, I'll make my shopping list. I thought then that prayer was an appeal to some Higher Force to give one what one wanted, a rather rudimentary idea which many people still hold. They pray for what they want. Anyway, that was my stage in my evolution at that time so I thought, what do I want, and I made my "shopping list". It was that I should have health, wealth, wisdom, long life and happiness. And a few years ago I went through this list, and I ticked them off. I thought, well, I've always, after a poor start as a child, had good health. I am not in debt, which is wealth indeed these days. Wisdom, well, that's for other people to judge, but I think at least I have had the wisdom to avoid doing all the suicidal things that so many people find attractive. At nearly 93 years old I have had long life. But what about happiness? That's more difficult in such an evil, crime-ridden world. The stuff seems to be everywhere. I cannot accept the concept that there is a "Happy Land, far, far away." Nor can I accept that evil can only be overcome by more evil. We need to fight evil in a way never before tried - veganism, and all it implies.

I've never been clever enough to be an atheist - an agnostic, yes, over big spheres of life, where the problems seem debatable and insuperable, but I could never believe that Creation could ever have happened without some sort of Creative Force and that, after the Big Bang or whatever it was that started the whole system off, there must be some Driving Force, some Evolver, to enable everything as we know it today to have developed from simple forms. That doesn't mean anything personal in the way we think of old men with beards, or prophets, or people who have only sons born without the usual process of reproduction, it means some Force which we are quite incapable of fathoming and, behind all this is the frightening thought which I daren't think about it too deeply - I understand some people have been driven mad by trying to conceive what it means, and it is that eternity in time and space, by definition, must go on for ever, and these astronomers, who talk about the edge of the universe, are myopic - the universe can have no end, by definition, there must be something beyond any boundary and so with time, there is no end to the eternity in which we may have to pay for all the errors we make, to correct all the errors we make, through departing from natural law, about which we can do nothing.

If pious people step over the edge of a cliff, down they go. Their piety does not save them because they are ignoring a law of nature - gravity. If there are similar immutable laws - spiritual laws - these too must be obeyed. No excuse is made for ignorance of spiritual laws any more than there is for physical laws. We suffer if we disobey them. Piety does not excuse us. In veganism we can see that something happens that is beyond our wildest dreams and if I am asked what do I think about the progress of the Vegan Society after 60 years of struggle, by thousands of workers in it, here and throughout the world, I would say a brief comment that progress has been better than I expected. Next question.

GDR: Well that question was on gardening, but the answer was over a very wide area. What are your views on organic gardening and agriculture, and by "organic" of course I mean "veganic"?

DW: You've seen my row of compost heaps, each with wire netting round the sides, to let the air in, covered with a roof. Those compost heaps have never had any animal manure on them. Not that I have any objection to animal manure, it's all been part of the natural scene since the beginning of time, only to animal manure coming from exploited animals. My compost heaps are filled with all the weeds, grass mowings, vegetable waste from the garden, dead leaves, except for privet leaves. I once tried one packet of some activator, I forget what it was called, I thought it was terribly expensive, I tried this on one of the sections of the compost heap, and I felt the compost wasn't any better the next year, so I never used it again.

There is also a huge leaf hopper, which I built of brick, early in my retirement. It's about ten feet high and six feet square, and the bricks are set with spaces between for the air to go through, and when we have more compost than the usual compost heaps will hold, or the compost needs more than a year to decompose, we simply throw it in that bin which has a little trap door at the bottom, where, several years later, the compost can be shovelled out and taken back to the garden. All my digging was done with a fork, not a spade, so as not to harm earthworms.

GDR: *Do you feel that all food production should be grown organically?*

DW: Well, ideally, yes. I think in a vegan world, of course, there wouldn't be any animal manure on the scale that we have it now. I suppose we could always have a few animals, oh it would be a dangerous experiment to use, because we'd have the problem of the surplus males, as all the people who've tried goat keeping have found, but they could be allowed to live in a wild state over tracts of land, there'd be plenty of land to house them, of course, if it wasn't used for growing crops largely for animals, as at present.

Every vegan knows, of course, that the units of nutrition that can be got from any area of fertile land are many times greater if that land is devoted to plant crops than to animals and even in this age when the seas are overfished, I'm told that fish farms are not the answer to the question, because for every ton of fish that comes from them, between one and three tons of fish, smaller fish, according to the kind of fish they're farming, has to be used to feed the salmon or whatever else. So, this attack on the sea must still be used, in order to feed this terribly unnatural means of creating an unnatural food. And one further point about fish and fishing, which has always been accepted as a very peaceful occupation, one to encourage young children to adopt, because it takes their mind off other nefarious things that young people fall into - these creatures can never be a threat to man, because they're trapped in their environment. Unlike any other animal pests, they can never over-run the dry land - they're trapped there, and, when caught, they can never relieve their feelings with a scream, like other animals do. What agony they die in, in their millions, will never be known. So much for the pacifist view of fishing, and fish farms.

GDR: *Moving on from fish farms to genetically modified organisms, in fact a lot of farmed fish are genetically modified, what are your views on genetically modified organisms, plants or animals?*

DW: Well, it seems to me, as an ordinary, not-very-scientific person, the whole thing seems too good to be true - that we can alter the genetic make-up of any animal or plant by clever working in the laboratory, so that genes taken from fish can produce strawberries that have a longer shelf life. 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. We mustn't "play God", to use a religious expression. Science must realise that there must be commonsense bounds to whatever they do, otherwise they may find themselves with irreversible problems, which science can't solve. When H G Wells, late in life, wrote his book, "The Fate of Homo Sapiens", which I read recently, towards the end of that book, he said, "There is only one invention that I can think of that didn't create more problems than the one it sought to solve." Now that may have been an exaggeration; the example he quoted was chloroform. What seems to be a wonderful innovation makes problems that alter virtually the whole of Man's life, in every respect. I suppose if he were alive today he would use the motor car as a classic example. We can't reverse it now. I was thinking the other day of the recent series on television of the hundred greatest Britons who had ever lived, I thought someone ought to say what are our greatest inventions and mine would be the bicycle. I can't think of a single bad thing about the bicycle which was my main source of transport until I was the age of fifty, when I bought a car, for reasons I needn't go into now. And it was invented by a blacksmith, who lived just across the Solway Firth.

GDR: *What are your views on blood sports? I presume you're agin them! You know, fox hunting, shooting, you've already spoken about angling.*

DW: 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. And to think that much of the "sport" is led by the so-called aristocracy, I think prompts the idea, who are the aristocracy? Well, I think we choose ourselves whether we're going to be in the aristocracy. The aristocracy are the people who live by high moral principles, who try to keep themselves healthy, who don't gossip about other people, by saying things that they wouldn't say to their face, which constitutes most of what we call gossip. The aristocracy are the people, certainly, who don't kill for fun, of all things, and the people who refuse to join the long queue to their own extermination and to the gutter.

Someone once said, "The way to Heaven is the first turning to the right and keep straight on." Well, whatever sort of place Heaven might be, I consider veganism is, as near to that aspiration that we, as fallible humans, can get. Someone also said, "Heaven is a temper, not a place." and I hope most vegans would believe in that. But, whilst I'm referring to wise things that other people said, may I quote four lines of poetry that have always impressed me, by that very prolific poet, Anon.

Someone ought to write a book of a collection of all the wise things that Anon said, and this one, my word, it's true. These are the four lines.

*We are all blind until we see that, in the human plan,
Nothing is worth the making, that does not make the man.
Why build these cities glorious, if man unbuilt goes?
We build a world in vain, unless the builder also grows.*

What wisdom there is there! At this time, all our cities are under threat, needlessly, because Man has taken a wrong turning, early in his history, and throughout all recorded history, even throughout all his early battles. I read recently about the Battle of Agincourt. At the end of the day, the corpses of horses and men were lying six feet deep. Why should one creature have suffered as the horse has done, in the service of such a fallen creature as we are? And remember, we're all descended from tens of thousands of generations of these violent people. The miracle is that any of us, at this late stage, could find in our make-up, the wherewithal to have this latent wisdom, to see the folly, and to act upon it and to spread the gospel so that other people may be infected as the same way as people are infected with evil in all its forms.

One thing the first vegans decided upon early in our experiment, shall I call it, is that we should try to avoid what annoys us in propagandists in other fields and we decided that the first person singular, "I", should not be repeated too often, because it can make a barrier, like a fence, cutting us off from those we would convert. So, in all my early writings, I doubt, if I ever used the first person singular and another thing we thought would be wise, would be not to exaggerate before we had proved our point, because we couldn't escape the fact that we were taking on the world, unlike any other reformers before - we were in this tremendously responsible position of saying to virtually everyone else, "You are just plain wrong, in so many aspects of the things you are claiming in your life style."

GDR: *What are your views on animal experiments?*

DW: I said that cruel sports were the bottom of the barrel. I think I've got to move even them one up, and put vivisection at the bottom. It is probably the cruellest of all Man's attack on the rest of Creation. Particularly since it hopes to give benefits. Even if it does, we must ask the question, after millions of lives have been sacrificed, if all this effort had gone into other fields of investigation, like simple reformed living, would not the results far outweigh the benefits of vivisection, whatever they may be. I think one question vegetarians and vegans should always ask when we think that cruelty, these days, 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? And, if we couldn't, we have no right to expect them to do it on our behalf. Full stop! That simply compounds the issue. It means that we're not just exploiting animals - we're exploiting human beings. So that, day after day, year after year, they're doing their job, to think again of Lang's famous words "in the firm belief that they are doing nothing wrong."

GDR: *OK. What are your views on direct action?*

DW: I've never become involved in it, except in the general way of being a propagandist, which is the most direct action of all. 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, just could, be counter-productive? I'd rather not say "yes" or "no", because I don't know the answer to that.

I've respect for all the people who do it, but my own personal feeling is that I wouldn't do it. To use an analogy, I sometimes see, when on my walks, people climbing up vertical cliffs with their ropes and I sometimes think, there is an alternative way of getting to the top and getting the view, by just going a few hundred yards sideways, and walking up a valley. A rock-climber would, of course, say that idea is nonsense, we don't do it for the view, we do it for the challenge! But, if people want challenges, there is no shortage of sensible, humane, safe, challenges to get engaged in. I would never take up rock-climbing, and dangle on the end of a rope, that might be weak in one spot. The strength of a chain is its weakest link, and so is the strength of a rope, and if that rope breaks, as inevitably, I think it will, sooner or later, I would probably get killed. And then I wouldn't be able to proceed with whatever peaceful work I'm on earth to do. So, rock-climbing is out, as far as I'm concerned. But, at least, it isn't hunting innocent animals and I don't stand on a soapbox to condemn them - it's their own business, let them get on with it. (As long as they don't disturb peregrines' nests on the way up!)

GDR: *What are your views on vaccination?*

DW: Vaccination? I wasn't vaccinated as a child. I was always too weak!

GDR: *So weak that you're now 92 years old?!!*

DW: Yes. I was a weakling, I suffered from constipation, I'd a weak heart, I'd anaemia. For a long period in my schooldays I had to go down to Boots with my weight card, on doctor's orders, to have my weight registered. So, I wasn't vaccinated. My brother was, and my sister was, and my sister had a terrible arm, I remember. She was eight years younger than I was, but I wasn't vaccinated, and I didn't get smallpox. There is a story, by the way, about vaccination, which tells us how careful we have to be about statistics. It dates from the days of the Raj in India, where a company of recruits went out to serve in the army, and they were lectured by the Medical Officer of Health, warning them that they should be vaccinated. It wasn't compulsory but the evidence was very strong that they'd be in dire danger if they weren't. In the last company, who'd gone out the year before, half of those who were not vaccinated had died. But when someone pursued the records, they found that only two were not vaccinated, of whom one never got smallpox, and the other one was killed by a tiger, so his claim that fifty percent of the soldiers who weren't vaccinated were completely wiped out was absolutely true, but one needs to know all the facts before falling for statistics, especially from those who have something to sell. I like to think that vegans are less naive and gullible than most people and, more often than other people, they comment, when they read an advert, by saying "Well, they would say that, wouldn't they?"

What do I think about vaccination? That was the question. I keep going off the point! Of course, smallpox was a terrible killer and it wasn't surprising that scientists sought some kind of antidote, to protect the people from it. We shall never know, of course, whether smallpox, like all the other zymotic diseases, came about, not through lack of prophylactics, but through wrong living, which so reduced the natural resistance of Man that he couldn't meet the attacks of pathogens, which were there all the time, in his environment. And I pin my faith now to building up our natural resistance against disease.

GDR: *Of course, the point is that most, if not all, vaccines, are cultured on things like chick embryos, and other animal materials.*

DW: Oh, yes! And I may add that most orthodox medicines are also proved, or tested, on animals, and this perhaps is the greatest inconsistency in vegetarians and vegans who may try to conform to the rules of their societies, but take orthodox medicines, hoping that they've not been produced as a result of animal tests. And that is one reason I've never taken them. And, in my view, that is a more serious inconsistency even than wearing leather or using wool, because these are by-products of industries that are primarily there to provide meat. I know, in a vegan world, these products wouldn't exist. But we mustn't fuss about what are obviously the lesser evils of a life in which we're trying to cope with situations that are brought about by a world designed to cope for people who don't hold our principles. We must try to find another way round the back, and, hopefully, I think we must do it over the years and perhaps over the decades by bringing back our natural resistance. I sometimes feel we must all accept that, in nature, the law of the fittest prevails - the weakest go to the wall and the strong carry on the story. The strong breed and Man is the only exception where we give precedence to the weak, instead of letting them go to the wall. But I would add, we must also match nature's system by eliminating the weak by making them strong. That is the ultimate answer. And that can only come about, probably, over generations, by correcting these dreadful mistakes that Man has made throughout the whole of his history. That is why veganism must come first among all our noble causes we support and nearly all of us, I suppose, subscribe to many of them. I know in my case, my pension, or quite a substantial part of it, goes to causes which are tackling the problem in a fragmented way, but I see the point of their limited approach to what is inevitably a much wider and more difficult problem.

GDR: *What do you think of the way the Vegan Society has developed since you were running it? You've already partly answered that, and you also said you wanted to talk about the magazine. So, perhaps you could develop that now.*

DW: Well, better than expected, certainly. One wonders how far it will go, now that we have the machine all set up, at great expense and work on behalf of thousands of people, hundreds of them already earning a living, catering for the vegan idea in one kind or another. The fact is that it is still here, growing stronger, all the time, now spreading to many parts of the world. This 2003 calendar, with my picture on it, is from a vegan society in New South Wales. I think the genie is now out of the bottle, no-one can ever put it back, to the ignorant days before 1944, when this seed was planted by people full of hope, full of aspiration that surely this idea would attract enough followers for it at least to survive.

And now, of course, we have our attractive quarterly magazine. I can't help comparing it with my humble "Vegan News" which I produced at great labour before the Society was first inaugurated. Normally I spent a whole night assembling the various pages, and stapling them together. I'd limited the number of people, who subscribed their five shillings a year, to five hundred, because I couldn't cope with a bigger number.

I had my own life to live, which wasn't easy at that time, and to produce five hundred copies of a twelve-page newsletter meant running six thousand pieces of paper slowly through my Roneo and inspecting each one to see that every line was clear and readable, because there would have been no point in all my work if what I sent out wasn't readable! Even one word missing from a sentence can make the reader wonder about the whole sense of that sentence. This brings me to the only criticism I have of our present attractive magazine. I hesitate to make it but it is made constructively in the hope that we will have a yet better magazine. There is a little jingle, you know, that must have been invented long ago, for children, which went "good, better, best, never may I rest, till my good is better, and my better best". That is not only good advice to children, it's good advice to all of us, and to those who produce magazines, propagating ideas in the hope that they'll convert readers, but how can they convert anyone if they leave the reader in doubt of what was written?

And so I come to my only criticism and I'm going to quote the misuse of colour, which can add so much to the attractiveness of any periodical. If the printer uses his art to make anything that's printed difficult to read then he must be told that this is not desirable and I'm going to quote, however pretty his art might make a periodical appear, an article that appeared in the Summer 2002 "Vegan". It's called "Carrots and Cannibals". It was printed in the usual spidery type, which I feel, for the benefit of those who are growing old, could be one step larger, to make the type easier to read, but it's printed on a coloured background so that, in my case, I found it so hard going to read that I missed it out and about a fortnight later I went back, with the help of a hand glass, and I read this article, which was one of the best articles I have ever read in "The Vegan", written by Anne Philbrow. I thought what a pity if other people like me, older people, have not read that article that was so carefully constructed, just because it was simply too difficult to read. Compare that with this clear printing on the front of the Summer "Vegan" - white letters on a dark background, standing out clearly, and yet, in the latest magazine, we get the contents in white letters on a virtually white background - most difficult to read for most people whose eyesight is not as good as it was.

So, I say there's nothing wrong with colour printing providing it doesn't obliterate the words or make them more difficult to read, especially for older people who may, for all we know, be the very people who leave legacies to the Society. The legacies don't come from teenagers or young people who're struggling, day by day, to live, and pay the basic living expenses, to keep their business, and their educations, going. The legacies come from older people, not rich people, but people with no dependents, very often, who can leave thousands of pounds as a kind of blood transfusion to keep our message still available for those who are drawn to read it. I suppose there may be people who will object to that, or any other, criticism, but I felt, early in my life as a propagandist, in vegetarian societies especially, and, in the early days of the Vegan Society, we were sometimes unfortunate enough to find, on our committees, people who seemed to object to everything, relishing it, at last, because of frustrations elsewhere in their own lives, in their jobs or in their marriages. At last they'd found a platform where other people had to listen. These people are few and far between, but they mustn't be allowed to destroy the peaceful atmosphere of people who travel far, and very often at their own expense, to deliver what they see as a fair judgement on the problems that we have to face as a movement. I won't say that they must be swatted, but they must be told, or made to see, in the nicest possible way, that this isn't the way to behave in any committee. I've never been at a Vegan Society Council meeting, I don't know the people on it, it's no reflection on anyone there, but I've seen it happen in my early experience, and I suppose it happens on all committees - people who relieve their frustrations, created by factors elsewhere in life, and glorifying the fact that at long last they have a vote and people have to listen. May such people always be outvoted by the more sensible members of any committees, anywhere, where we try to make the difficult process of democracy work. Compared with democracy, dictatorship has obvious advantages. I know, from the work I did, in the two years before the Vegan Society was formed, when I'd no-one to consult, I could do everything my own way, I don't think in those years I could have survived, if I had to write to the few people concerned, and ask for their opinion. I had no telephone, I'd no motor car, I could only hope that they would see my point, until the point arrived, when I had to hand over the work to a committee and to people paid to do the job. All the early work was done by volunteers.

In a way everyone whom the Society has ever paid to do the office work, to answer all the thousands of enquiries, that a growing movement, bursting with contacts, receives, all those people have necessarily been underpaid, so that, when their so-called salaries have been used, to pay their basic expenses, in a way they've all been volunteers. Even our Chief Executive is on a wage at the very bottom of anything else that is paid in the commercial sector. Because we can afford nothing more. And we're enormously grateful to these people, because heaven knows what would happen if they all packed in, and got jobs stacking supermarket shelves or something as menial as that, in order to keep the show on the road. So, my own opinion must be to say a big "thank you", you won't be there for ever, you can't be, by the nature of the job you have. And that job, in my view, is the most important job in the world. I wrote a letter when our last Chief Executive was appointed, reminding him that he had the most important job in the world, but unfortunately not the highest paid. So the Vegan Society has always, in that sense, been supported by voluntary labour. May there always be people who apply for vacancies in the office, who are willing to make this sacrifice, even for a brief period in their careers. We're all indebted to them. Next question.

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

DW: I hesitate to suggest anything to a movement which seems to be going well, and spreading world wide, and silencing critics, still surviving, still around. Speaking from my old age, I sometimes think I've outlived my critics, and I can't remember the last time that I encountered one. The edifice, if that's the right word, that survived all attacks before we started our work, now is crumbling, because of the inherent weakness of its own structure. Even farming, which for centuries was our basic industry, employing more people than any other, seems now to be on the way out. Farmers can no longer get insurance against diseases like BSE, foot and mouth disease, all the rest of the afflictions that farmers need to handle, usually at great expense, through the service of vets, and as we saw in the foot and mouth debacle, having their whole animal populations wiped out, destroying not only their own industry, but, certainly in many parts of the country, the tourist industry too. People were no longer willing to come to the lake District, for instance, if they couldn't walk on the fells. So, the tourist industry, which was far more valuable than the farming industry, suffered. I won't say irretrievably, because, even after one year, it is now, slowly, getting back to normal, but if we had a return of the foot and mouth disease, any government in power would have to have a different policy altogether from that applied in the last time. Farmers are diversifying, but there is a limit to the extent that this can go. They need to be ingenious, hard-working, living on a lower income than they've ever had before, and wondering whether their children could carry on their farms, as they have done for centuries before, when the parents were no longer able to run them.

GDR: *Do you have any regrets about your life?*

DW: Well, after a slow start, I married the right woman, at the ripe old age of 36, and we remained happily married for 47 years, until her death nine years ago. That certainly wasn't anything I regretted, although we live in different times now, and whether, if I were young today, I would ever dare to commit myself for life, for better or worse, to anyone else, I hesitate, but that's a hypothetical situation, which fortunately I'll never have to meet. But the marriage vows, for better or worse, were necessary in centuries past, when, if a man walked out on a woman, she was bereft of an income, and, especially for those who had passed the first flush of attractive youth, they had a very bleak future indeed. I'm not an opponent of marriage, because it worked well for me, but I do think that, when it doesn't work, it can be a most cruel affliction, especially on the innocent party. That isn't directly associated with veganism, it can happen to anyone on any diet, of course, or life style. But, because things are changed, we have to take a more tolerant view of those who feel that, when young, they made a mistake, and they deserve to be given a fresh start, either with a new partner, married or not. I mustn't say more on that subject because it doesn't, strictly speaking, relate to veganism any more than it does to any other life style.

GDR: *It doesn't have to be related to veganism, Donald. But thank you for that answer.*

DW: I've been lucky in that I chose the right job, and, as I said in my little speech when I retired at the age of 63, as a woodworker I'd been a square peg in a square hole and that I'd never seriously thought of doing anything else. That indeed is luck which many people, alas, never have. So, I had the right wife, I had the right job, I've lived in the right place which I can't fault, except there aren't enough vegans in it, but one lesson we have to learn in life is we mustn't expect too much. We have to say, "So far so good, I've been lucky, I appreciate it, and, indeed, what have I done to deserve it?", when things repeatedly go right, while for so many other people they go wrong. Is that luck? Or is it something that happens inevitably if one pursues a course that one feels is right? And, having made that commitment, day by day, one feels one's way as one goes along.

GDR: *What do you consider your greatest achievement in your life?*

DW: My greatest achievement? Well, it's in succeeding, I think, although I mustn't be the judge, in my own estimation, in achieving what I set out to do. One can hardly rise higher in one's opinion of one's life in general, than to feel I was instrumental in starting a great new movement which could even, 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.

GDR: *If you had your life to live over again, what changes would you make, if any?*

DW: There is one little thing that I would change. In my early days, before I was married, I had a succession of digs, or lodgings, and, sometimes, when I went away at the weekend, I would ask for a reduction on the weekly rent I paid, because obviously I hadn't been there, eating the food. I always got it, but I feel now that I niggled about something which a more generous person would have forgotten about. I wouldn't niggle about money any more, if I had my time again.

GDR: *Donald, do you have any message for the many thousands of people who are now vegan?*

DW: Yes. I would like them to take the broad view of what veganism stands for. Something beyond finding a new alternative to, shall we say scrambled eggs on toast, or a new recipe for a Christmas cake. I would like them to realise that they'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 I would say that 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, just as the early sailors, who were at sea for months, found they developed scurvy because they were lacking in vitamin C, because they were living on dried meat and biscuits, and when they made port, and had access to fruits like limes, their illnesses vanished. Simple proof, like that, that someone once wrote a book, I think his name was Otto Carque and he called the book "Vital Facts About Food". That was written a long time ago, and we could add to it today, with many things that have been discovered by trial and error, over the last sixty years. I think all vegans should make themselves familiar with these very simple facts and remember, all the time, what an awful lot of danger they're avoiding. In the early days our critics used to say, "You don't know what you're missing!" We know now! We're missing an awful lot that they're having! Conditions so serious that it shortens their life by many decades, gives them pains and illnesses very soon after the first flush of youth has passed, and ties them to that medicated regime for the rest of their lives. That is what vegans are missing, providing, as I say, they obey a few simple, commonsense, rules. That's my message to vegans who have not been long in the cause.

GDR: *Do you have any message for vegetarians?*

To vegetarians, I would say, accept, as, if you're honest you must, that vegetarianism, whilst being a necessary stepping-stone, between meat eating and veganism, is only a stepping stone. We all use this stepping stone, I've not met a vegan who didn't approach the movement by that route. There may be vegans I've never known, over the last sixty years, who made the change all in one leap, but I'm sure that, being a realist, I accept that vegetarianism is a necessary staging-post in the evolution of humane dietetics. All my early work was in the vegetarian movement. I ran the Leicester Vegetarian Society for many years. I organised their monthly meetings. I met virtually all the speakers at that time, who were anybody in the movement. I got a unique insight into what was then considered as far as anyone might be expected to go towards a plant-based diet, but, of course, we've now moved on from there and vegetarians must realise that, although they might find it inconvenient at times, to go the whole way, that is .the path that our experience shows that they must go.

GDR: *Do we have your permission to publish an edited extract of this interview in "The Vegan" and a longer version of this interview on the website?*

DW: Yes, you have my full permission. I do fear the consequences of publication because it could lead to the kind of correspondence I had in the early years - far too many letters, or perhaps even callers, that I could possibly deal with. That is my only fear. I suppose I could reply by directing them to 7 Battle Road.

GDR: *That's the thing to do. In fact, there's not likely to be all that many letters nowadays, but there'll be floods of emails. You can't receive emails anyway, so that lets you off the hook! And the office can easily deal with emails.*

DW: Since all these new methods of communication have led to the virtual extinction of letter-writing, which someone once said was the gentlest art, my letters now are few and far between. I'm always delighted to have them - providing they don't need replies!

I might say there that when I was producing the "Vegan News", the hard work really was not producing the newsletter, but the avalanche of correspondence that followed, most of which needed answering, many of which didn't include a stamped addressed envelope for the reply, which I hardly knew how to deal with, being on two pounds a week, and yet the questions were so sensible and those who wrote them were so sincere, that usually, and I think always, I did reply to them. I can't think of, ever, not replying to a serious enquiry, but I can't guarantee that now, in my old age, that would still be possible.

GDR: *One last question. Won't you please come and visit the office in St Leonards? I've asked you before, and you haven't come! I would be very pleased, in fact I'd be honoured to collect you from here, and drive you down there myself - I suggest not in the wintertime, but maybe in the springtime when the milder weather comes along.*

DW: You are rather out on a limb, aren't you, for anyone living up here in the far north - not as far north as you are, of course, but then you're, what is it, thirty years younger than I am. Would you do it in thirty years' time? That's the point. I'm a sociable person - I seem to have been mixed up with crowds of people all my life, and I do like, now, to meet them one at a time. I feel that one of my anathemas in life is what is called "the lively debate", where so many people all talk together, across each other, so that no-one can tell what anyone says. I think when one person is speaking, the rest should listen and that, nowadays, is expecting a lot of people when they assemble.

And another thing I've noticed, especially in the last few years, people on television seem to be speaking faster and faster all the time, and I feel if only they'd slow down, and think a little bit more before they say it, there's a saying, if I can remember it, "People who say what they think, should think what they say", because so often people say what they think, and then they regret it. That is one of the dangers of being a propagandist.

GDR: *Well, you know what they say - if you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen.*

DW: Yes, that's very true. And yet, the propagandist has to get the message across somehow. In my early days I accepted that the pen is mightier than the sword, and the pen in my case was a typewriter, which I had to buy second-hand along with my Roneo in order to get started, and I had to learn how to use them.

I sometimes think, well I'm thinking non-stop, all the day, just sitting down with my comfortable body, well fed, and not short of sleep, at long last, I've no commitments, I just think, and providing I'm warm, I think of the future as Man has always done, of course, and, sometime, 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 at his own funeral, there'll be all the spirits of all the animals he'd never eaten. In that case, it will be a big funeral!

And I certainly don't seek fame in any form, except when I'm dead and then, only because the idea I spawned will be progressing, generation after generation, learning how to be healthy, how to avoid all the pitfalls that are bringing other people down, and leaving one satisfied in the sense that one has gone as far as one could with the limited mental and emotional equipment we have. Further than that, I can't think that mortal Man can travel any further always keeping our ears open for those who have new ideas as we expect our would-be converts to listen what we have to say. Veganism certainly can't stand still, it must move on, perhaps in the direction of more raw food when we all know the destructive power of heat on food, how its nature is changed and perhaps its value too. Finally, if this is the last question, I think we should accept that although enormous strides have been made, by our workers over the last sixty years, science hasn't got the complete answer.

I doubt if anyone really knows how our digestion works. They might think they know, but the whole thing is so wonderful, that food can be converted into flesh and blood, bone and hair, as well as energy, mental processes, and even into spiritual enlightenment, that science has hardly got round to accepting as a possibility. We don't know the spiritual advancements that long term veganism - I mean not over years or even decades, but over generations, would have on 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. Full stop.

GDR: Which, I think, is a very positive note on which to end the interview. Thank you, Donald.