

Why Birmingham2013?

It is a huge privilege for physiologists in the UK to have the opportunity to welcome our international colleagues from all the 50 or so member societies of IUPS, and from countries that are not yet members, to come to the Congress in 2013. The last Congress in the UK was in 1993 and it attracted over 4500 scientists, in addition to great interest in the national and international media. We also published a book, *The Logic of Life* (OUP, 1993), that played an important role in re-establishing physiology's credentials as a necessary discipline both for the fundamental science of understanding life and for the practical applications for developments in health care. At that time, sequencing of the human genome was already in progress, though we had to wait a further 7 years for the first full draft sequence to be announced. Even so, Nobel laureate Sydney Brenner, who gave one of the great plenary lectures at the Congress, was already issuing a challenge to physiologists, emphasising that our science was essential to interpreting the data that was emerging from the genome projects.

I also recall the palpable excitement as the vast plenary lecture hall in Glasgow filled to overflowing to hear Sir Bernhard Katz give the opening lecture. It was a congress with five Nobel laureates as Honorary Presidents: Black, Hodgkin, Huxley, Katz and Vane.

So, will IUPS2013 match, and even exceed, IUPS1993? I think so. Having participated in the meetings of the International Scientific Programme Committee and interacted with the organisers as the programme of the Congress is developing, I can say with great confidence that a splendid Congress is in the making. One of the reasons for saying that is that, a decade after the draft human genome sequence, it has become abundantly clear how prescient Sydney Brenner was in 1993. We are all awed by the immensity of the task now facing us. Simply sequencing the genome has not given us the answer to the question 'what is life?' nor has it yet delivered on all the health care promises. The sheer complexity of the genome and its interpretation has challenged us all. Whether you call it physiology or systems biology, we are back in action at the frontier. Interpreting the significance of the genome requires functional analysis. The higher levels of the systems biology approach are essentially indistinguishable from physiology.

Comparing Glasgow 1993 with Birmingham 2013, however, inevitably raises another question. Birmingham was originally the city chosen for the 1993 Congress when it was approved by the General Assembly in Vancouver (1986). By the time of Helsinki in 1989 we had switched to Glasgow. One of the reasons for that switch was that the reactions to the Birmingham site were not very enthusiastic. The National Exhibition Centre (NEC) was the only location at that time capable of hosting a Congress of our size. It is a large and impressive location, and close to an airport. But it is more than 10 miles from the City Centre, and an hour away by public transport.

Understandably, therefore, there is still a question in many people's minds: why on earth have the UK organisers decided to choose Birmingham? The answer needs to be broadcast loud and clear. *Birmingham has transformed itself since that time.* The Congress will *not* be held at the NEC, miles out of town. It will be held in a new International Convention Centre, the ICC, situated right in the centre of town in the famous canal area. The canals are the remnants of the Industrial Revolution. In their post-industrial state they have been cleaned up, the canal side wharfs and jetties (think of Amsterdam) have been refurbished to become the pubs, coffee houses, restaurants and night clubs where we will relax, drink, eat and discuss in 2013.

I was one of the sceptics, having been deeply involved in the decisions for the 1993 Congress. I have become an enthusiast simply by going there and seeing for myself. I capped my visit by enjoying the acoustics of the magnificent new Symphony Hall and a performance by the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. It is easily one of the best concert halls in Europe.

Visit the Congress website to learn more: <http://www.iups2013.org/>

I can vouch personally for the accuracy of what you will find there. There is no hype. What you will see on that site is what you will experience in July 2013.

But, most of all, you will be amazed by where our science is taking us, now that it is acknowledged to be precisely what the genome sequencing requires to make sense of the question 'what is life?'

Denis Noble

President IUPS