

Seventeenth Congress

Oxford—1947



FIG. 1. Sir Henry H. Dale of London, President of the Congress.

This account of the Oxford Congress is largely a compilation of published statements by its President, Sir Henry Dale, an informative letter from the Chairman of the Local Committee, Professor E. G. T. Liddell, and a contemporary report by the Congress Manager. As such it is difficult for either Sir Henry or Dr. Liddell to accept it as his own original account of the congress. Nevertheless, both men have graciously read it, corrected it, and approved it; to this extent it can be considered as authoritative. The editor is grateful for this assistance in preparing the manuscript.

At the Zurich meeting in 1938 the International Committee selected Oxford as the location of the next congress. The formal invitation to meet there was presented by Sir Henry Dale on behalf of the Physiological Society of Great Britain and was formally accepted by the congress. The proposed meeting was interrupted by the outbreak of World War II, and it was not until 1947 that the proposal was revived by the Physiological Society.

The general theme of the congress was set by its President, Sir Henry Dale, in his remarks at the Opening Plenary Session in the Sheldonian Theatre, July 22, 1947:

“Fellow physiologists, you have come from all those countries in the world from which, under present conditions, it has been possible to travel hither. It is to me a matter of pride and pleasure that it falls to my lot to bid you all welcome to the first International Physiological Congress after a break of nine years. We are not here today to discuss the cause of that long tragic interval. We are here as physiologists to renew old friendships and to make new ones; to hear from one another about researches carried out since last we met, in physiology and in those fields of science which are its immediate neighbours. . . . It may be hoped that all of us, or at least all who are still in our active years, have before now been able to pick up again the threads which had to be dropped for a while, or to continue with less distraction the course of our researches; but in either case, to work with renewed enthusiasm, born of the feeling that we can be busy once again with physiology as a world science, and that we can meet again today as a world community of friends and colleagues, united by our common interest. It is in that sense that I have the privilege of extending to all of you who come from other

countries, on behalf of all British physiologists, the heartiest of welcomes and the right hand of warm friendship.”

Sir Henry then added the following explanation for his chairmanship of the meeting.

“I should like you to understand that I regard my presence today, in the Presidential Chair of the Congress, as a very great honour to myself, but something of an anomaly. I am here through the generous insistence and, if I may say so, the undue modesty of my distinguished colleague and yours, Professor Liddell, the Professor of Physiology in this University. The fact, however, that I, though occupying the chair, have had none of the trouble or the responsibility of arranging the congress here in Oxford makes it easier for me to pay tribute to what Professor Liddell and his organizers have done. The times are difficult, and you can imagine that it has required a gallant effort on their part to enable the Congress to be held here at all so soon after the war. I know that they have been glad to make the required effort; and we can all rejoice that the opportunity has been created for us all to meet so soon.”



FIG. 2. Professor E. G. T. Liddell, Professor of Physiology at Oxford and Chairman of the Organizing Committee.

After this explanation the President called on four other physiologists to speak for other countries and other languages: Professor B. A. Houssay of Buenos Aires, in English and Spanish; Academician Orbeli of Moscow, in

Russian (with a translation read by the President); General R.K.S. Lim for China, but in English (formerly Professor of Physiology in Peking); and Professor Henri Fredericq of Belgium, in French.

The initiative in reviving the idea of a congress in Oxford in 1947 came from the Physiological Society of Great Britain, and Professor Liddell was officially asked by the society whether he could arrange a congress there. According to his own account he "set about writing to the numerous aristocracies who form the University of Oxford (Oxford has been called a jungle of democracy) and got support from nearly all quarters. So then I said 'yes' to the Committee of the Society and without much ado was told to get on with it.

"In principle the organization was simple because we were accustomed to arranging an over-night meeting of the Physiological Society in alternate summers. So all we had to do was to expand in time and space. We were lucky to get a manager, Captain E. W. Geidt, who had managed an annual meeting of the British Medical Association in 1936. He was a retired military man—most efficient and agreeable. He came in for a chat a few times a week, 18 months before the Congress. Soon he had an office, telephone and secretary, and so he continued for a long time, expanding only a few months before the Congress. The treasurer of the Society was prompt in paying our expenses.

"As Oxford is poorly supplied with hotels, Congress members mostly had to face the rigor and quaintness of living in colleges. The academic people of Oxford played up charmingly to our requests and (in the main) were most cooperative. Tradespeople, however, had not revived from the restrictions of war, nor had the British government. Food was still rationed and permits had to be obtained to feed our members. One small, private dinner had to be attended by a government minister who was to see that we did not eat too much.

"Our first anxiety happened on the day before the Congress began. An early arrival, coming from a country where traffic moves as Napoleon decreed (and not as the Romans decreed), stepped off the sidewalk, after looking in the wrong direction, and was knocked down by a car so that he spent several weeks in the hospital. None of his colleagues had arrived and the ambulance service here was not too fast in making contact with us.

"Then one morning, soon after the opening, a member whose country had suffered from all sorts of shortages (thanks to Hitler) came to the office to ask for a clean collar. But we could not oblige. We had never thought of applying for clothing coupons in that sort of connection, and anyway, extra coupons were almost impossible to obtain, and then only after long delay. However, Mr. Woolworth sold them lots of table cutlery and similar domestic equipment. Then they smiled."

G. L. Brown was a member of the Organizing Committee of the Physiological Society, concerning which he writes: "What is so delightful about it is

that the whole congress seems to have been organized with the help of one meeting held on the stairs in Cambridge and two meetings in Oxford. Those really were the days.”

It is probable that the physiologists in Oxford did not find the problem quite so simple, as is indicated by the following report submitted to the Physiological Society by Captain Geidt:

“The Seventeenth International Physiological Congress was held in Oxford from Monday 21st July to Friday 25th July, 1947, under the Presidency of Sir Henry Dale. The preliminary arrangements were in the hands of the Congress Sub-Committee comprising E. D. Adrian, Sir Lindor Brown, Sir Henry Dale, H. P. Gilding, A. V. Hill, and E.G.T. Liddell, but once the general outline had been decided the detailed arrangements were left in the hands of Liddell. Any points involving major financial decisions were referred to Gilding for approval as Honorary Treasurer of the Society. A local committee comprising the heads of the main departments interested in the congress (or their nominees) met twice to settle details of the program.

“The Congress was attended by 1120 members from 37 different countries, including 50 associate members and graduate and undergraduate helpers. There were, in addition, approximately 100 wives of members who were not themselves physiologists. 216 other persons had paid their membership subscriptions but were unable to attend; of these, 21 asked for their subscriptions to be refunded; copies of Congress literature and a copy of “Integrative Action of the Nervous System,” by Sir Charles Sherrington (presented to each member on registration) were sent to the other 195.

“Of those attending, 976 were billeted in colleges through the Congress office; the remainder either stayed with friends, or made their own arrangements for accommodation, or came daily from London and elsewhere. The numbers attending would undoubtedly have been greater but for the difficulties connected with foreign exchange and the remitting of currency to this country, and with obtaining transatlantic passages at reasonable rates. Several people who had applied for membership had to cancel their reservations because of these difficulties.

“On the other hand, the participation in the Congress by some of the Chinese members was made possible by the provision by UNESCO of funds sufficient to enable six of them to fly from China.

“The first printed invitations were issued in November 1946, when nearly 2,500 were sent out; subsequent editions brought the total number up to 3,900, and the supply of forms ran out several weeks before the opening of the Congress. These invitations were sent, in the first place, to those people whose names and addresses were on lists supplied either by the physiological societies or by prominent physiologists in their respective countries. In some instances complaints were made that the number of people in some countries to whom invitations had been sent was unduly small, but this was due to the difficulty of obtaining the names and addresses of suitable recipients in certain countries.

“One political consideration was introduced into the Congress by the participation of a Cuban delegate. Application for membership had already been received from a Cuban who was at the time in the U.S.A., but who eventually did not arrive in this country. About a fortnight before the beginning of the Congress we had a series of telephone conversations with the Foreign Office and the British Council in London saying that the President of Cuba was himself a physiologist and wished to be represented at the Congress and to have a communication made on his behalf. We pointed out that the program had already been made up and had gone to press, and that it was quite impossible to interpolate fresh items at this very late date. The Foreign Office attached great importance to this matter and expressed an urgent hope that we should be able to do something to meet this wish of the President. They pointed out that a large proportion of the sugar imported into this country came from Cuba, and they feared that a refusal to accept the President’s communication might have serious repercussions, and that the sugar ration might in consequence be halved. As a result of special arrangements that were made, the President’s communication was read by Dr. L. Clerch on Thursday afternoon, and later on the President expressed to the British Minister in Cuba his pleasure at the treatment he had received. But about two months later, the Foreign Office inquired whether the paper had actually been read, as Reuter’s correspondent in Havana had heard rumors to the contrary. We were able to assure them that the President’s paper, had in fact, been read.

“We were exceptionally fortunate in being allowed to use Rhodes House as a reception center for registration, as the Congress office for the week, and also as a sort of club house for members.

“A Government Reception was given in Christ Church on Monday evening, 21st July, when members were received by Mr. Marquand, the Paymaster General. A group photograph was taken of the Congress in the garden of Trinity College when 961 members were present.

“The printed program included 365 communications. These were grouped according to subjects and were allocated to nine lecture theatres which were in use for six occasions each—two sessions each on Tuesday and Thursday, and one session each on Wednesday and Friday. In addition, 22 cinematograph films were scheduled to be shown twice each during the Congress, once in each of two lecture theatres which were occupied for four sessions. About 40 permanent demonstrations were staged in seven of the departments, 18 other “timed” demonstrations were given twice each, and two others were scheduled to be given once each. Four special instructional films were shown on Tuesday evening. These had been made by a unit of I.C.I. under the guidance of an advisory panel of members of the Society.

“There were inevitably several alterations in the program, some items having to be deleted owing to the inability of the authors to be present; and a few other items were interpolated by special arrangement, with the permission of the chairman in charge of the lecture theatres.

“A small commercial exhibition was staged in the Department of Human Anatomy where some half dozen or so firms exhibited, by invitation, items of interest to physiologists.

“Bodley’s Librarian arranged a special exhibition, in the new Bodleian, of historical books and manuscripts of medical and surgical interest illustrating the history of medicine and surgery and medical education in Oxford. Another exhibition in the Museum of the History of Science showed a collection of historic scientific instruments pertaining to medicine and surgery.

“There were no scientific sessions scheduled for the afternoon of Wednesday, 23rd July, when excursions were arranged to places of interest, and a garden party was given by the English-Speaking Union in the grounds of Magdalen College to meet members of the congress. In addition, 50 tickets at each of the two theatres in Oxford were put at the disposal of members. Several members resident in Oxford gave informal parties at their houses or Colleges, and the British Council gave a sherry party at the Mitre Hotel to meet members of the delegations from the U.S.S.R.

“On the afternoon of Friday, 25th July, in a Convocation of the University held in the Sheldonian Theatre, the Degree of Doctor of Science *honoris causa* was conferred on C. H. Best, H. S. Gasser, B. A. Houssay, A. Krogh, and A. Szent-Gyorgyi. This ceremony was followed by the Closing Plenary Session of the Congress, when it was decided to accept the invitation of the Danish Physiological Society to hold the next congress in Copenhagen in 1950.”

The scientific program of this congress included only the short papers volunteered by members. There were no invited lectures, with the possible exception of an evening session at which the only speaker was J. Needham on the subject, “International scientific cooperation and the value of an International Union of Physiology.” There were, however, 48 scheduled film presentations, 38 “permanent demonstrations,” and 38 “timed demonstrations.” The demonstrations were in strict accordance with the tradition of these congresses, and it is most unfortunate that the vastly increased size of present congresses makes them virtually impossible to arrange. There were 29 demonstrations at Copenhagen and 17 at Montreal.

It is difficult to attempt an appraisal of the scientific value of a congress after a lapse of 20 years, but we can offer the contemporary appraisal of the President at the closing session of the Oxford Congress. Sir Henry said, in part:

“I think that we shall all agree that this has been a good Congress, rich in what has always been the prominent characters of every international congress of physiologists—good physiology and good friendship. . . . and it seems to me that there has been a notable absence of the kind of communication which all of us have encountered on some occasions, and which seem to have been presented with no more important purpose than that of reminding us of the author’s existence. On the contrary, in every communication presented to us on this occasion there seems to have been something of

real novelty and of genuine scientific interest. I think that we all obtain, indeed, the cheering impression that, in spite of all that has happened since we met in Zurich, the world's physiology is still in good heart and overflowing vitality, and that the birth-rate of new physiological data and new physiological theories is still in encouraging excess of the death-rate."

After some further words of gratitude and appreciation to the local organizers of the congress, and two brief speeches by A. Szent-Gyorgyi and E. G. T. Liddell, the Oxford Congress was closed.