

International Activities

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7.1 Introduction — the First International Congress of Biochemistry

Very soon after the Second World War it became apparent that Biochemistry was on the march and that effective international collaboration was necessary to achieve maximum rate of development of the subject.

The first post-War International Congress of Physiology was arranged for 1947 in Oxford and the Biochemical Society approached the organizers to ask them “to ensure that Biochemistry was allocated its share of the programme”. The reply was that it was “impossible to issue a general invitation to biochemists to participate in the Congress and that while no actual embargo would be placed on biochemical papers, these would have to come from, or be introduced by, members of the Physiological Society”. Even the mild R. A. Morton was moved to describe this as “a dusty answer” [1]. However, it served to stimulate the main Committee, in particular J. N. Davidson (Fig. 3.14), to start on the attempt to organize a Congress of Biochemistry with full international status, a difficult exercise because at that time there was no International Union of Biochemistry. In general, International Unions are the responsible agencies for organizing international congresses. The Committee of the Physiological Society responded by confirming their original stance but added that “if the Biochemical Society decided to initiate Congresses of their own they would have the Physiological Society’s blessing, encouragement and offer of assistance”. The project was also officially recognized by the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry (IUPAC) but without commitment for the future.

Although first informal surroundings did not reveal strong support for the idea the Committee was sufficiently convinced

of its viability to send out letters to 100 selected biochemists in which they were invited to give their views on the need for an international congress. Only 24 replies were received but all were in favour, all approved of Cambridge as the location and all felt that August was an appropriate time of the year to hold the Congress. Ernest Baldwin, then at Cambridge, but later Professor of Biochemistry at UCL, reported that Cambridge could accommodate 780 people "including a few women" in August 1949. So the Committee got to work; they allocated £1700 [£17,000] to the Congress funds and set up a Congress Committee to make appropriate arrangements. The Congress was held from 19 to 25 August in glorious weather which revealed Cambridge at its very best. In all ways the Congress was completely successful as evidenced by the attendance of 1741, of whom 700 came from 32 different countries. As Professor A. C. Chibnall (Fig. 2.10 and Plate 1B), the President of the Congress, said in his opening speech: "As evidence of a world-wide interest in Bio-chemistry we could ask for no finer demonstration" [2].

For those, like the author, whose first International Congress it was, the experience was unforgettable. One still remembers the excitement not only of meeting legendary figures but also of being allocated Darwin's rooms in Christ's, not that the rooms were ideally situated when one contracted a dose of food poisoning! A Garden Party at St John's added a typically English dimension to the international occasion (Fig. 7.1).

In his opening speech Chibnall reported that an informal committee from different countries would consider how machinery for organizing future biochemical congresses could be established. Sir Charles Harington (Fig. 2.7), the Chairman of this committee, reported at the closing session of the Congress and submitted three resolutions. In short these were: (i) that the invitation of the Société de Chimie Biologique to hold the next International Congress in Paris in 1952 be accepted with gratitude; (ii) that an International Committee for Biochemistry be set up comprising 19 delegates from 14 countries with Harington as chairman (the U.K. representatives were J. N. Davidson and H. Raistrick, Professor of Biochemistry, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine); (iii) that the committee should approach the International Union of Scientific Unions (ICSU) with a request for recognition as the international body representative of Biochemistry with a view to the formal constitution of an International Union of Biochemistry (IUB) as soon as possible. These resolutions were carried unanimously and thus the future of International Congresses of Biochemistry seemed assured and the mechanism for the formation of IUB had been set in motion. However, the actual birth of IUB was by no means straightforward and the ultimate success of the negotia-

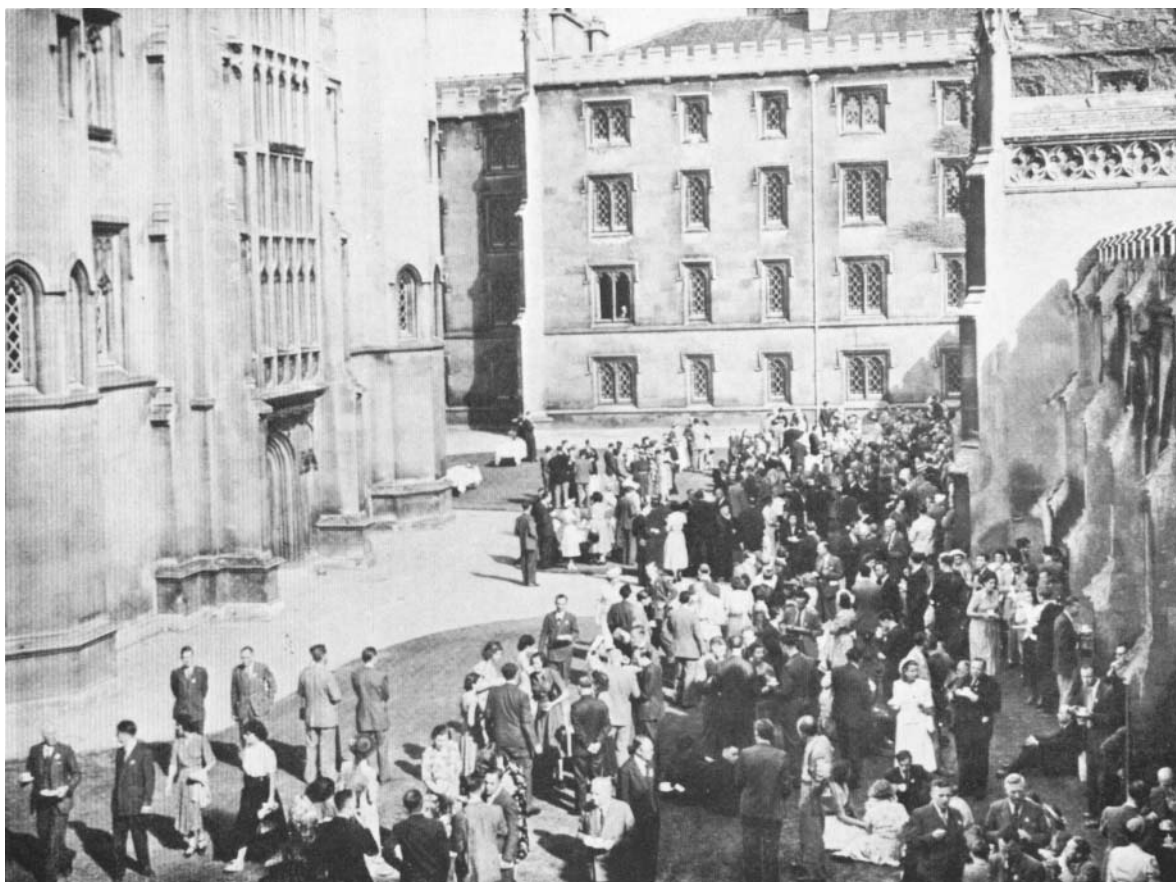


Fig. 7.1. Garden Party at St John's College Cambridge during the First International Congress of Biochemistry, 1949.

tions depended to a great extent on the persistence and diplomacy of the members of the Biochemical Society involved. The negotiations lasted six years.

7.2 The International Union of Biochemistry (IUB)

Although IUPAC had officially recognized the first International Congress of Biochemistry, its rider "without commitment for the future" suggested that it was not altogether happy with the development. This was reflected by the resolution early in 1949 by the British National Committee of Chemistry that "the proposal for an International Union of Biochemistry would be better replaced by a proposal to establish a joint committee between the International Union of Biological Sciences and the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry which should be its mother union". The British National Committee for Biology rejected the idea of an IUB mainly, according to Davidson, "on the grounds that a multi-



Fig. 7.2. Sir Chales Dodds, F.R.S.
Chairman of the Society Com-
mittee, 1951-1952.

plicity of unions was to be deplored" [1]. Perhaps more ominously in September 1949 IUPAC reconstituted itself into six sections, one of which was to be devoted to biological chemistry. The chairman of this section was Professor A. W. K. Tiselius (Sweden), who was also a member of the International Committee set up in Cambridge in August 1949.

The next important development was that Professor E. C. Dodds (Fig. 7.2), who had been nominated as a delegate to the IUPAC Congress to be held in New York in 1951 by the British National Committee for Chemistry, was invited by the main Committee to represent the interests of the Biochemical Society. It was a step which was to cause some unexpected difficulties. Meanwhile draft statutes of an IUB drawn up by Harington were approved by the main Committee, who invited The Royal Society (who would eventually be the adhering body, as with all other International Unions at that time) to set up a National Committee for Biochemistry.

An official application to establish the IUB was forwarded to ICSU for its consideration at its meeting in Washington in October 1951; F. Dickens (secretary of the International Committee; Plate 1A) and J. N. Davidson were to present the case drawn up in a memorandum prepared by Davidson, Dickens, Dodds and Harington.

Just before the Washington meeting Tiselius was elected President of IUPAC in September in New York, thus leaving the chairmanship of the Biological Chemistry section of the organization vacant. At short notice Dodds, who it will be recalled was representing the interests of the Biochemical Society, was invited to replace Tiselius; this he did with some misgivings and "only on condition that it was understood and minuted that he was in favour of an independent union of Biochemistry and that he would continue to further the cause of an independent union" [1]. The acceptance of this post, despite the conditions he attached to his agreement, led to disappointment and bitter criticism from some supporters of an IUB. It was felt that this greatly weakened the applicants' case and this was presumably further affected when Murray Luck (IUPAC) wrote to Harington inviting the International Committee to nominate five persons to fill vacancies on the Committee of the Biological Chemistry section. There also seemed to be a lack of interest in an IUB on the part of many American biochemists.

In the atmosphere prevailing it was not unexpected that the ICSU meeting at Washington deferred the consideration of the proposal to found an IUB for one year. However, the Society Committee was undaunted and in May 1952 it circulated a questionnaire on the proposed IUB to all members. As in all these types of questionnaire only about 25% of the membership bothered to reply but those who did were overwhelmingly in favour of the proposal. A rather

smaller majority was in favour of establishing an interim working arrangement with IUPAC. At their June meeting the main Committee reaffirmed its commitment to the formation of the IUB, after hearing from Davidson that American opinion was now moving towards the idea of an autonomous union. They also agreed that they would not object to British representatives serving on the IUPAC Biochemistry Section Committee provided that they continued to press for an independent union.

The International Committee met for the third time during the 2nd International Congress of Biochemistry in Paris in 1952 with Davidson in the chair in the absence of Harington. They approved the stance taken the previous year in Washington (to hold out for an independent union) and then agreed to meet the Biological Chemistry Section Committee of IUPAC immediately after the International Committee meeting. Thanks to the staunch work of the chairman a stormy meeting closed with the International Committee holding its ground. Later in the same year the Executive Board of ICSU at its meeting in Amsterdam heard the case for the formation of an IUB presented by Davidson, Florkin (Belgium), Brand (U.S.A.) and Westenbrink (Holland). The Board were more sympathetic than they were in Washington; they came to no definite decision but, "as a result of unofficial advice proffered during the meeting, but outside it" [1], the IUB was established as a going concern independently of ICSU.

By 1953 an Interim Council had been set up and national membership was being considered. In the summer the fortunes of the IUB received a considerable boost when the Biological Chemistry Section of IUPAC meeting in Stockholm, with Dodds in the chair, gave definite support to the new Union [3]. Professor A. Neuberger (Plate 3A), who was a member of this Section at the time, stated that in the face of much opposition from the chemists Dodds stuck to his view favouring the establishment of the new Union [4]. Dodds' decision to take the chair was thus vindicated and the Biochemical Society Committee showed its appreciation by instructing its Honorary Secretary to thank him for his valuable work.

The next step was to set up a British National Committee for Biochemistry as the adhering body to IUB. Such a Committee usually comes under the aegis of The Royal Society, which, however, could not act before the IUB had been formally accepted by the General Assembly of ICSU; the next meeting of that body was, unfortunately, not until 1955. So in the meanwhile the Biochemical Society decided to act as the interim adhering body and set up a provisional National Committee. In January 1955 the Interim Council of IUB, now evolved into the Constitutive Assembly of IUB, held its first General Assembly in the University of London. Representatives from 12 countries (15 countries had indicated their wish

to join) met under the chairmanship of Professor Marcel Florkin (Belgium), who had succeeded Sir Charles Harington. The statutes were presented and formally adopted and the first officers and council were elected [5]. The U.K. members of Council were Sir Rudolph Peters (Fig. 3.11), Sir Charles Harington and Professor R. H. S. Thompson (Plate 1B), who was also elected Secretary-General and who served in this post with distinction for nine years. A formal letter of application by IUB for adherence to ICSU was sent to their Secretary-General. By the time of the second General Assembly of IUB, held in Brussels in August 1955 at the time of the third International Congress of Biochemistry, five more countries had been admitted to the Union. Later that month the 7th General Assembly of ICSU met in Oslo and the application of IUB for adherence was confirmed and accepted.

So after a long, protracted and sometimes acrimonious battle the IUB emerged with full independent status. Its continuing success is known to everyone and this is not the place to recount it (see [6]). It must be clear, though, that its successful launch was due in great part to the efforts and the persistence of the Honorary Officers of the Society, in particular Davidson, in the early 1950s. Biochemistry in general owes them a considerable debt. In spite of Davidson's leading role he always considered the lobby as international. In a speech at the 50th Anniversary Dinner he said that after the 1952 meeting with ICSU (see above) the delegates lobbying for IUB came away feeling that their mission had failed but "the passionate pleading of a polylingual Belgian (Florkin), a forthright Dutchman (Westenbrink), an irrepressible American (Brand) and a taciturn Scot (Davidson) must have had some effect".

The first formal British National Committee for Biochemistry was set up by the adhering body, The Royal Society, with Sir Rudolph Peters as its first chairman; it first met in June 1956. A list of members who have served as chairmen of the National Committee is given in Table 7.1. The terms of reference of this Committee, as for all National Committees, are "to promote the branch of science in which they are concerned, more especially as regards international requirements, to nominate delegates to represent the U.K. at meetings

Table 7.1. Chairmen of the British National Committee for Biochemistry

1956	Sir Rudolph Peters, F.R.S.
1958	Sir Frank Young, F.R.S.
1964	Professor F. Dickens, F.R.S.
1967	Professor R. H. S. Thompson, C.B.E., F.R.S.
1970	Professor A. Neuberger, C.B.E., F.R.S.
1977	Professor T. W. Goodwin, C.B.E., F.R.S.
1982	Professor S. V. Perry, F.R.S.

of the IUB and to initiate proposals or questions for discussions at such meetings”.

Over the years comments have been made questioning both the necessity for The Royal Society rather than the Biochemical Society to be the adhering body and also the membership of the National Committee. In spite of strong representations, particularly by Professor W. J. Whelan (Fig. 3.10), that The Royal Society was too formal and remote for easy communications with the Biochemical Society, The Royal Society has continued to be the adhering body to IUB. One of the most telling arguments for the *status quo* was that a change might jeopardize government funding of the National Committee. Certainly at the present time the remoteness of The Royal Society in this matter cannot be sustained. One important development which arose from the long arguments was that in 1967 the Council of The Royal Society approved a recommendation that the Chairman of the Biochemical Society should be *ex officio* a member of the British National Committee. So its present composition is six representatives of The Royal Society, one from the Association of Clinical Biochemists, three from the Biochemical Society, one from the British Biophysical Society, one from the Nutrition Society, one from the Physiological Society, two from the Royal Society of Chemistry, one from the Society of Chemical Industry, one from the Society for Experimental Biology, one from the Society for General Microbiology and, *ex officio*, an officer of The Royal Society (at present the Biological Secretary) and the Chairman of the Committee of the Biochemical Society. Of the present members of the National Committee only three out of twenty are not also members of the Biochemical Society. So the voice of the Society is strongly heard on the National Committee at the present time and it would be surprising if the Society's views on most issues did not prevail.

7.3 Federation of European Biochemical Societies

As Europe was gradually recovering from the devastation of the Second World War and as travel and contacts became easier it was not surprising that the main Committee of the Biochemical Society turned its sights on joint meetings with their European neighbours. An early, probably premature, proposal for a meeting in Ghent in 1948 had to be dropped because of lack of support. However, a joint meeting at Oxford in 1956 with the newly formed Belgian Biochemical Society was highly successful. Meetings in Continental Europe were then organized by Professor P. N. Campbell (Plate 1B), the Honorary Secretary, after he had persuaded the Wellcome Trust to provide travel funds; the venues were Turku (1959), Paris (1960) and Louvain (1962). He also introduced the idea of inviting Continental European biochemists to the summer



Fig. 7.3. Professor F. C. Happold. First Chairman of FEBS, 1964. Chairman of the Society Committee, 1963–1965.

meeting of the Society held alternately at Oxford and Cambridge and Professor W. J. Whelan (Honorary Meetings Secretary) arranged such meetings in Cambridge in 1962 and in Oxford in 1961 and 1963, when they ceased for reasons which will soon become apparent. Meetings of British biochemists with their counterparts in Continental Europe, however, continued until 1965; the locations were Leyden (1963) and Santa Margareta (1965). However, the Campbell/Whelan partnership, ably aided by Professor H. R. V. Arnstein (Plate 3A) (Honorary Meetings Secretary), and Dr W. F. J. Cuthbertson (Fig. 4.3) (Treasurer) had already had the idea of developing some form of association of Biochemical Societies in Europe and took the opportunity afforded by the Oxbridge meetings to explore the possibility informally with officials of the European Societies. Meanwhile in 1962 Whelan had resigned as Meetings Secretary to be reappointed in 1964 to a new honorary post very necessary because of these developments — International Secretary. In the meanwhile H. R. V. Arnstein had become Honorary Meetings Secretary. After a considered discussion in 1962 it was decided that a meeting of delegates from all European Societies should be called for the Oxford meeting in 1963. At this meeting it was proposed that a Federation of European Biochemical Societies (FEBS) be set up. Provisional statutes had been prepared by Whelan: “These had very simple aims. They provided in the main for the Societies to engage in mutual collaboration and, in particular, to hold a combined meeting somewhere in Europe every one or two years. In brief the proposals and statutes were accepted and the Federation was launched from 1 January 1964. It was decided to hold the first Federation meeting in London at UCL in March 1964 [7]”. Professor F. C. Happold (Fig. 7.3), then Chairman of the Society, became the first chairman of FEBS, Whelan acted as Secretary of the meeting and Professor S. P. Datta (Fig. 7.4) as Treasurer. The meeting was clearly a success and amongst other innovations was the organization of a Trade Fair by Dr D. C. Watts. FEBS is now a household word amongst biochemists and Whelan [8] recalls that he has “still to learn any objections from Boots Pure Drug Company, who, I only discovered later, were already using ‘FEBS’ to describe a patent analgesic”.



Fig. 7.4. Professor S. P. Datta. Treasurer of FEBS, since 1964.

At the next meeting of FEBS in Vienna in 1965 it was decided that a Secretary-General and a Treasurer were necessary in spite of efforts to keep administrative activity to a minimum. Whelan was appointed Secretary-General and Datta Treasurer. When Whelan left for the U.S. in 1967, Arnstein was chosen to succeed him, an appointment which Arnstein says was “almost entirely due to the esteem in which the Biochemical Society was held at that time by our European friends ...” [9]. He had also, of course, considerable experience in running the Biochemical Society’s affairs. Up to the present

time Campbell has served FEBS in many capacities, Datta continues to be a most effective Treasurer and with the author, who, at that time was Chairman of the Publications Committee, recently concluded new and favourable contracts for the publication of the *European Journal of Biochemistry* and *FEBS Letters*. Datta was also an outstanding Managing Editor of *FEBS Letters* from its inception in 1967 until 1985, when he retired.

In 1981 FEBS returned to the U.K. to hold its 14th Congress in Edinburgh. The burden of organizing the Congress was carried out by a Committee consisting mainly of the Professors of Biochemistry in Scotland with the help of a full time Executive Officer; the Chairman of the Committee was Professor H. M. Keir (Plate 1B). The basis of the Congress was a series of 39 one-day Symposia so arranged by careful planning to avoid as far as possible overlap of cognate topics and thus to cause a minimum of distress to participants. Each Symposium was self-contained, consisting of two lecture sessions (invited speakers), one Poster Session and one Workshop Session. The abstracts of the meeting were published as a special issue of *Biochemical Society Transactions*. The Congress was a success both scientifically and financially and, not unexpectedly, the hospitality was of a high order.

Thus, as with the formation of IUB the Biochemical Society can congratulate itself that the efforts of Whelan, Campbell & Co. led directly to the setting up of FEBS. Without their drive, enthusiasm and belief in the internationalism of Biochemistry the Federation would, at worst, never have been founded or, at best, its inception would have been greatly delayed.

When Whelan became Secretary-General of FEBS, Professor A. P. Mathias (Plate 1B) succeeded him as International Secretary. With IUB and FEBS working smoothly this post rapidly became redundant and it was abandoned when Mathias followed Professor A. N. Davison (Plate 1B) as Honorary Meetings Secretary at the time the latter became Honorary Secretary. Recently pressure is mounting for the restoration of this office (see Chapter 3).

7.4 Other International Activities

In July 1980 the Society welcomed a delegation from Japan to its Sheffield meeting. The main object of the meeting was to honour Sir Hans Krebs, with a Colloquium to celebrate his eightieth birthday. Two of the visitors took part in this two-day programme. The third day of the meeting was devoted to a joint Biochemical Society/Japanese Biochemical Society Colloquium on "Proteins and Peptides" organized by the Peptide and Protein Group. The Japanese Society paid the travel expenses of their delegation and the British Council



Fig. 7.5. Wall hanging presented to the Society by the Chinese Delegation attending the Oxford Meeting in 1982.

covered their accommodation costs during their stay in the U.K. The Society, in its turn, sent eight delegates to attend a very large meeting of the Japanese Biochemical Society in October 1982. Apparently 4600 members, out of a total membership of 9000, attended the meeting. The U.K. delegates reported that their hosts' hospitality was on an equally generous scale.

In 1982 the Society also welcomed a delegation of Chinese biochemists to the Oxford meeting, just three years after the Chinese Biochemical Society had been admitted to IUB. As a souvenir of their visit the Chinese delegation presented the Society with a wall hanging (Fig. 7.5) which now graces the Committee Room at Warwick Court. The visit of the Chinese delegation reminded Professor L. Young (Plate 4D) that one of his Ph.D. students who graduated in 1942, Professor Zhang Longxiang, became president of Peking University.

The Society is also involved in the European Federation of Biotechnology; this is discussed in Chapter 5.

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