

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sex, science and curated community at the World League for Sexual Reform 1929 conference

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Abstract

This article interrogates the scientific conference as a means by which the organizers of the World League for Sexual Reform's 1929 conference attempted to marshal the 'scientific spirit' in order to present progressive sexual reform as a rational and scientifically informed undertaking. The conference was carefully curated to make the sex reform movement (and the assorted characters that gathered under its banner) look serious, legitimate and, most importantly, scientific. The conference was also an attempt by organizer Norman Haire to exert control over the strategy of sexology, an enterprise that put him at odds with other prominent sexologists of the time. Crucially, Haire understood sexology as inherently intellectually interdisciplinary, but was strategically convinced that the only sound rubric through which to promote and gain acceptance for the movement was through medical science. This central debate, about how best to define the contested concept of sexology, continues among historians today. By examining how the 1929 conference organizers wrestled to define their sex-reforming remit and how they curated the conference to that end, this paper will offer a window onto the mechanisms via which adherents of intellectual communities contend with heterogeneity, how we judge forms of knowledge and, ultimately, what constitutes science.

There is so far no united body in England with an enlightened programme on sex subjects touching all sides of the question. The existence of such a group of people holding a Congress openly with foreign visitors and with the support of well-known intelligent people is calculated to have a very good effect.¹

In September 1929 the World League for Sexual Reform on a Scientific Basis (WLSR), after much preparation, held an international scientific congress in London in an effort to present itself as a united body 'touching all sides of the question' of human sexuality.² The WLSR was established with the aim of 'bringing about, in all countries, a new attitude towards all sexual questions, based on the findings of sexual science'.³ The league had

¹ Norman Haire, blank form letter to be sent to supporters, included in Haire to Dora Russell, 31 December 1928, Dora Winifred Russell Papers, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam (subsequently DWRP), Box 407, Image 107.

² Blank form letter, op. cit. (1).

³ 'The Constitution of the WLSR adopted at the International Congress at Copenhagen, July, 1928', programme of the WLSR London Congress, 1929, Ivor Montagu Papers, Manchester Labour History Study Centre (subsequently IMP), CP/IND/MONT/4/9.

its beginnings in a congress organized in Berlin in 1921 by the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, but did not officially come into being until 1928, at its first international conference held in Copenhagen. In September 1929 the league held a five-day international conference in London, organized by the London-based Australian gynaecologist Norman Haire and the British feminist and socialist campaigner Dora Russell. Haire was the president of the British Section of the world league, and Russell the secretary. The conference was a meeting of medical practitioners, sexologists and social reformers, and it included seventy speakers from across Europe, the Soviet Union and the USA. The papers covered birth control, marriage reform, the position of women, eugenics, tolerance of free sexual relations, sex education, legal reform and prevention of venereal disease. As well the formal papers and discussion, the conference had an extensive extracurricular programme. Delegates could make a visit to the Cromer birth control department, see a performance of Miles Mallesons's play *The Fanatics*, attend a *conversazione* in the Victoria ballroom at the Hotel Cecil, and take a motor excursion to Essex.

Conferences were key to the league. In the WLSR's foundational documents, drawn up at that first conference in Copenhagen, the league is described as being committed to 'bringing into practice in all countries the deductions from the researches of sexual science'.⁴ It would achieve this aim by 'bringing in touch with each other all persons in all countries, who have sympathies for sexual reform'. One of the most important means by which the league would facilitate this process would be by 'the organisation of international congresses'.⁵ The international conference, therefore, offers a window onto the workings of the league; the conference was the physical manifestation of this vital 'bringing in touch' of scientists and activists from across the world, and it was fundamental to the development of the interwar sex reform movement.

This article is about the phenomenon of the international scientific conference as a means of intellectual community formation, and, perhaps most strikingly, as a means of marshalling science in service of reform. Max Saunders has referred to the idea of the 'scientific spirit'.⁶ Writing about popularizers of the human sciences in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, he shows how this scientific spirit – 'sceptical, experimental, unafraid of challenging dogma' – was brought to bear on the approaches and methods of the social sciences and humanities, as well as the natural sciences.⁷ For the organizers of the WLSR 1929 conference, the scientific conference was a fundamental method through which the scientific spirit could be mobilized to legitimize the broad (and interdisciplinary) aims of the sex reform movement. This was no easy feat and, as such, the 1929 event lays bare much wider tensions in the European sexology movement.

What follows builds on Ivan Crozier's work on Norman Haire and the WLSR conference. Crozier identified the 1929 conference as a key site for both Haire and Russell to promote their reforming agendas, and he examined the implications of the congress on the pair's lives and career development.⁸ Here I want to focus on the ways in which 'science' figured in the organizers' understanding of the work of the league and how they hoped to communicate this to specific publics by arranging the conference in a particular way. The intricacies of the organization of the 1929 conference show that the question of what

⁴ Constitution, op. cit. (3), p. 2.

⁵ Constitution, op. cit. (3), p. 2.

⁶ Max Saunders, *Imagined Futures: Writing, Science, and Modernity in the To-day and To-morrow Book Series, 1923–31*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 170.

⁷ Saunders, op. cit. (6), p. 170.

⁸ Ivan Crozier, 'Becoming a sexologist: Norman Haire, the 1929 London World League for Sexual Reform congress, and organizing medical knowledge about sex in interwar England', *History of Science* 39 (2001), pp. 299–329; Crozier, "'All the world's a stage": Dora Russell, Norman Haire, and the 1929 London World League for Sexual Reform Congress', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* (2003) 12, pp. 16–37.

counted as ‘proper science’ became a way for sex reformers to thrash out the intellectual, political and disciplinary biases that characterize(d) sexology as a field. Where Crozier sees sexology as a distinct scientific field (often utilized within a much broader movement), this article shows that sexology has always been a broad, elastic and heterogeneous concept, and, importantly, that the study of scientific conferences offers a unique perspective on the way in which precisely these kinds of scientific identity and definition are mobilized, animated and tested.

The 1929 WLSR conference was engineered by Haire, and in many ways it reflected the battles that he chose to fight in his pursuit of the goals of the WLSR. The case of the 1929 conference shows that sex reform was a far from united body; there was no typical sex-reforming agenda. There was not a coherent world body of sexologists who together determined a strategy and used the congress to put it into action. The world league might maintain a set of planks or shared aims, but the national branches, and different figures within them, had conflicting ideas about how best to transform attitudes towards sex.

What follows turns on a rich set of correspondence held in the Dora Russell archives, mostly between the two organizers of the 1929 conference, Dora Russell and Norman Haire. Both Haire and Russell were committed to sex reform but had arrived at the WLSR via different routes: Haire from a medical background, seeking to transform medical attitudes to sex and public access to sexual medicine, and Russell as part of a wider agenda for political transformation, in particular a commitment to transforming the lives of women. Their correspondence reveals these differing but overlapping agendas. So often historians have to rely on dry minutes and published material to reconstruct conference proceedings; in contrast, here we have a case study with which it is possible to build a very detailed picture of the interpersonal dynamics and private plotting that went on behind the scenes.

More broadly, a focus on conferencing, and on the intricacies of conference organizing, cautions against any temptation to think of historical organizations as having any agency of their own beyond the activities and utterances of the individuals who populated them. Much of this article is based on the words of just two people within just one national branch of the much larger WLSR, and that is precisely what makes it useful. Access to such a detailed account of the frictions inherent in organizing the conference allows us to see the some of the frictions of the wider movement – in microcosm. By looking at the specifics, the logistics and the careful crafting of the conference, we can begin to demystify the processes via which adherents of organizations and intellectual communities jostle to convey a common and coherent purpose. As all the articles in this special issue show, conferences have been a vital part of innumerate organizations. These conferences do not just *happen*, they are *made*, and the individuals that made them had their own agendas, personalities and preoccupations, and, while subscribing to a common aim, they very often saw their own way of getting there.

In an effort to make the public image of the league scientific, Norman Haire approached the 1929 conference as a carefully curated exhibition, a delicate balancing act between making the conference a place of genuine exchange between scientists, medical professionals and social reformers, and simultaneously not allowing it to become associated with the more ‘propagandist’ causes of the era. Interrogating the conference as a phenomenon in itself, therefore, makes visible this delicate balance. I have argued elsewhere that in order to better understand any intellectual or political community it is important to consider both the spatial and the emotional context of idea swapping in all its forms and forums.⁹ Thinking about how people meet and where the discussions take place, both formal and informal, is fundamental to understanding how ideas are

⁹ Laura C. Forster, ‘The Paris Commune in London and the spatial history of ideas, 1871–1900’, *Historical Journal* (2019) 62, pp. 1021–44.

made and remade. Conferences are organized with this in mind: they are an attempt to manufacture situations via which intellectual exchange can take place, and they operate as a way to signal to the wider world that such exchanges are taking place between those most qualified for the job. Where people sit, in what order they speak, the size and shape of the room, and the rooms and restaurants used for the social elements of the proceedings are carefully chosen by conference organizers, and then remade by participants, who each imbue them with new meanings and feelings. In other words, a conference is a conscious attempt to stimulate all the unconscious elements of community, to engineer encounters, and to formally create spaces for informal conversations and connections. It is curated community. Geographers and urban theorists have so far been better than historians at interrogating the ubiquitous conference – so much a part of academic, political and scientific life, and yet so little studied.¹⁰ Ruth Craggs and others have described conferences as stage-managed events at which ideals and identities are performed.¹¹ This was certainly the case for the WLSR conference, with its roster of prestigious speakers, and Norman Haire as the punctilious stage manager.

Conferences form a key part of the practices of knowledge making key to the development of sexual science, alongside practices such as network building, translation and the activities of research institutes.¹² Interventions in conferencing histories have often understood the performative aspects of conferences as speakers performing to each other, as part of the construction and exchange of knowledge *within* a community of experts or participants.¹³ But what is more striking in the case of the WLSR London conference is that the organizers were as much concerned with performing to the outside world, if not more so. This was a manifesto conference: a public declaration of policy and aims, designed to make the sex reform movement look serious, legitimate and scientific. Perhaps most strikingly, the conference was also an attempt by Haire to wrestle control of the strategy of sexology, an enterprise that put him at odds with a number of other prominent sexologists and sex reformers. What follows is about the extent to which Haire was able to marshal the congress as an important step in furthering his agenda for the league, and the effect of that on public understandings of the sex reform movement. The conference was an explicit attempt by Haire to cast the sex reform movement as a scientific movement, and to divorce it from the pervasive and often hostile interwar characterization of earnest high-minded left-liberal progressivism.

The study of sex

In the interwar period, sexual science was becoming increasingly established as an area of intellectual activity in Europe and could trace its history back to the late nineteenth century

¹⁰ Notably Stephen Legg's project *Conferencing the International: A Cultural and Historical Geography of the Origins of Internationalism (1919–1939)*, funded by UKRI at the University of Nottingham, at <https://gtr.ukri.org/project/5B92827E-11D6-45D2-A805-06682ED17018> (accessed August 2020). Also see Stephen Legg, "Political atmospherics": the India Round Table Conference's atmospheric environments, bodies and representations, London 1930–1932', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* (2020) 110, pp. 774–92.

¹¹ Ruth Craggs and Martin Mahoney, 'The geographies of the conference: knowledge, performance and protest', *Geography Compass* 8 (2014), pp. 414–30; Jake Hodder, 'Conferencing the international at the World Pacifist Meeting, 1949', *Political Geography* (2015) 49, pp. 40–50.

¹² E.g. for sexology institutes see Rainer Herrn, 'Zerstobene Hoffnung: Zur Gründung des Instituts für Sexualwissenschaft vor 100 Jahren', *Jahrbuch Sexualitäten* 4 (2019), pp. 211–15; for translation in transnational scientific communities see Heike Bauer, "'Not a translation but a mutilation": the limits of translation and the discipline of Sexology', *Yale Journal of Criticism* (2003) 16(2), pp. 381–405.

¹³ For a contemporary example see Julieen R. Zierath, 'Building bridges through scientific conferences', *Cell* (2016) 167, pp. 1155–8.

via key publications such as Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), and Henry Havelock-Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* (1897). By 1929, the infrastructure to support sexual science was well developed across the Continent, most famously in Magnus Hirschfeld's Institut für Sexualwissenschaft (Institute for Sexology), founded in Berlin in 1919. Across Britain and Europe there were now numerous formalized groups, meetings, collaborations and, of course, conferences. The 1929 WLSR conference was closely followed by the Second International Congress for Sex Research, the psychoanalytic conference, and the BMA enquiry into psychoanalysis, all of which took place in London in 1930. In other words, this was a time when sex was being taken seriously in England.

However, as Lesley Hall has cautioned, it would be a mistake to overestimate the English appetite for sexual reform in the late 1920s.¹⁴ Indeed, as Dora Russell herself acknowledged in her welcome speech at the 1929 conference, England was perhaps 'the most reactionary country on sex questions'.¹⁵ At the time of the conference the dissemination of birth control, while not strictly illegal, was subject to governmental restrictions and was not widely available, and discussion of birth control was very often associated with eugenicist and Malthusian arguments being made by middle-class advocates.¹⁶ Abortion and homosexual acts were illegal; marriage bars prevented married women from working in various professions (including the civil service and teaching professions); and a patchwork of laws relating to obscenity and the distribution of materials deemed to be obscene (for example, the Post Office Act of 1884 which made it illegal to send indecent articles through the post) meant that open discussion and publication of materials relating to sex and sexuality were subject to censorship.¹⁷

Kate Fisher, Jana Funke and others have shown that the study of sexology was always by necessity cross-disciplinary. Modern understandings of sexuality were constructed by scholars from across the human, social and medical sciences whose combined knowledge led to increased understanding of the biological, psychological and cultural dimensions of sexual behaviour.¹⁸ The legal and social norms that intersected with the medical subjugation of women and those outside heteronormativity meant that in post-First World War Britain sex reform was very much associated with prominent social reformers, notably Edward Carpenter and Henry Havelock-Ellis, and feminists such as Stella Browne.

In 1913 the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology (BSSSP), based on the writings of Carpenter and Havelock-Ellis, was founded to advance a particularly radical agenda in the field of sex reform.¹⁹ The society aimed for 'the consideration of problems and questions connected with sexual psychology, from their medical, juridical, and sociological aspects'.²⁰ It advocated a greater openness in the discussion of sexual matters (particularly regarding homosexuality), greater sexual freedoms and an end to outdated

¹⁴ Lesley Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain since 1880*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000, pp. 114–15.

¹⁵ Norman Haire (ed.), *World League for Sexual Reform: Proceedings of the Third Congress*, London, Keagan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1930, p. xx.

¹⁶ See Harold Smith, 'Sex vs. class: British feminists and the labour movement, 1919–1929', *The Historian* (1984) 47, pp. 9–37; Stephen Brooke, *Sexual Politics: Sexuality, Family Planning, and the British Left from the 1880s to the Present Day*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011; Lesley Hall, 'Malthusian mutations: the changing politics and moral meanings of birth control in Britain', in Brian Dolan (ed.), *Malthus, Medicine, & Morality*, Amsterdam: Brill, 2000, pp. 141–63; Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex, and Marriage in Britain 1918–1960*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

¹⁷ See Lisa Z. Sigel, 'Censorship in inter-war Britain: obscenity, spectacle, and the workings of the liberal state', *Journal of Social History* (2011) 45, pp. 61–83.

¹⁸ Kate Fisher and Jana Funke run a Wellcome-funded project titled Rethinking Sexology: The Cross-disciplinary Invention of Sexuality: Sexual Science beyond the Medical, 1890–1940, at the University of Exeter. Project website at <http://rethinkingsexology.exeter.ac.uk> (accessed August 2021).

¹⁹ For BSSSP see Lesley A. Hall, "'Disinterested enthusiasm for sexual misconduct": the British society for the study of sex psychology, 1913–47', *Journal of Contemporary History* (1995) 30, pp. 665–8.

²⁰ F.W. Stella Browne, 'A new psychological society', *International Journal of Ethics* (1918) 28(2), pp. 266–9, 268.

prejudices. While the society did count some doctors as members, it was peopled in large part by ‘keen propagandists on various subjects’, as Stella Browne, the tenacious and leading birth control activist, described them.²¹ Herein lay the problem in the eyes of Norman Haire.

Haire was a member of the BSSSP for a time, and the BSSSP and the British branch of the WLSR had some crossover of aims and personnel. However, for Haire, the British branch of the WLSR needed to be quite distinct from the BSSSP; the WLSR was to be a vehicle for reform on a proper scientific basis, and the 1929 conference was his chance to set the agenda. A hyperfocus on the events of the WLSR 1929 conference, therefore, illuminates the powerful personalities and fraught relationships at the heart of this clash of sex-reforming strategies.

For Haire the way to achieve sex reform was via medical legitimacy. Haire was a doctor and, as Ivan Crozier has shown, his training in gynaecology ‘gave him a sound position from which to make pronouncements on sexual life without being too intimately associated with the radical underworld who had discussed sex in the generation before his arrival in London’.²² Haire saw medicine as the only sound rubric through which to convince the public of the need for sexual reform. For him, professional medicalization was the path to scientific authority. This was in many ways a tactical allegiance. Haire knew very well that sex reform must be interdisciplinary – he makes that clear in his desire for an organization ‘touching all sides of the [sex] question’ – but he thought that without scientific authority, any cross-disciplinary group could be too easily dismissed as propagandist.²³

Indeed, when Haire wrote, with regard to the sex reform movement in Britain, that ‘there is so far no united body in England with an enlightened programme on sex subjects touching all sides of the question’, he was making a pointed dig at the BSSSP, an organization that saw itself as exactly that type of British body. Haire denigrated the BSSSP for being too caught up with reformist aims and too interested in homosexuality – in other words, he felt the group lacked the proper scientific credentials that were needed to balance its propagandist aims. Haire was concerned that the personalities and activities of the BSSSP would perpetuate the field’s marginality in the eyes of social-policy elites and the public at large. Haire’s organization of the 1929 conference, therefore, was an explicit attempt to tout a certain image of the league to supporters and to the public. In other words, the conference was a mechanism through which some members of the sex reform community attempted to exert power and authority over the direction of the league’s activities, and to curate the scientific frame through which the league was viewed.

Aside from the BSSSP and the WLSR, interwar Britain saw the formation of various nebulous and interconnected progressive associations that promoted reforms at the intersection of socialism and what we might term the politics of the body and mind.²⁴ Groups such as the 1917 Club, the Federation of Progressive Societies and Individuals, and various Open Conspiracy organizations that sprang up following the 1928 publication of H.G. Wells’s *The Open Conspiracy: Blue Prints for a World Revolution*, sought to find modern, intelligent and enlightened solutions to all manner of societal ills. George Orwell immortalized and made ridiculous the progressive reformers who populated associations of these kinds

²¹ Browne, op. cit. (20), p. 269.

²² Crozier, ‘Becoming a sexologist’, op. cit. (8), p. 301.

²³ Haire to Dora Russell, 31 December 1928, DWRP, Box 407, Image 107.

²⁴ For more on these groups and their agendas see Lesley A. Hall, ‘“A city that we shall never find”? The search for a community of fellow progressive spirits in the UK between the wars’, *Family & Community History* (2015) 18, pp. 24–36.

in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), lamenting ‘the horrible – the really disquieting – prevalence of cranks wherever Socialists are gathered together ... the mere words “Socialism” and “Communism” draw towards them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, “Nature Cure” quack, pacifist, and feminist in England’.²⁵ For Orwell this was a ‘half-baked “progressivism” preached by ‘vegetarians with wilting beards ... earnest ladies in sandals, shock-headed Marxists chewing polysyllables ... [and] birth control fanatics’.²⁶

For Haire and Russell the WLSR conference was an attempt to offer an alternative image to the public. Haire in particular, as an outsider determined to establish his branch of sexual science as a legitimate medical field in the notoriously conservative English medical community, tasked himself with casting sexology as a legitimate and rational discipline populated not by sandal-wearing cranks, but by serious medical men and the most respected intellectuals. The conference would do this in two ways: by showcasing sexual science as a medical field of study, and by bringing the scientific method to bear on the proceedings of the conference and the activities of the league. Haire was committed to bringing a rational and scientific spirit to the image of the 1929 conference. A conference is a public space that brings together competing interests and egos, fervent feelings, clashes and conflicts, and all manner of messiness and machinations. But in order that the scientific spirit prevail, Haire sought to keep all this backstage and present the conference as a cohesive and robust collective that, through considered and rational discussions, could bring the scientific method to bear on the social and political questions of the day.

Planning the conference

Initially the league considered Rome as a possible venue for the 1929 conference. However, there were ‘concerns as to whether scientific freedom [could] be guaranteed’ and ‘Italian colleagues reported that organising the congress would create problems for them.’ Therefore it was decided ‘(with the consent of the Italians) to hold the congress in a different country’.²⁷ Henry Havelock Ellis was very sceptical about holding the congress in London, arguing that England was not a centre of cutting-edge sexological science, and he refused to attend as a result. Haire reported Havelock-Ellis’s concerns to Russell but argued that while ‘there is no doubt that [a conference] will evoke a great deal of hostility, and we will all be accused of all the perversions of [Richard Freiherr von] Krafft-Ebing’,²⁸ that might be precisely its value. The previous year Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* had become the subject of a censorship campaign by the *Sunday Express*. The case had proved a rallying point for interwar progressives, and at the trial Norman Haire was called to give testimony in defence of the biological legitimacy of homosexuality.

Given this recent controversy, Haire argued that ‘even a small and inglorious congress in London is preferable to a bigger splash elsewhere’.²⁹ In other words, precisely because England was considered more conservative than some of its European counterparts when it came to sex, and precisely because the conference would almost certainly arouse hostility, a thoroughly scientific and respectable conference accepted by the medical establishment in England would do wonders for the movement. One of their first tasks as organizers would be to ‘draft the planks of the League’s platform in a new shape, less

²⁵ George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, London: Secker & Warburg, 1965 (first published 1937), pp. 173–4.

²⁶ Orwell, *op. cit.* (25), p. 215.

²⁷ Unsigned typewritten note (in German), 15 September 1928, DWRP, Box 407, Image 89.

²⁸ Norman Haire to Dora Russell, 19 October 1928, DWRP, Box 407, Image 91.

²⁹ Haire to Russell, 25 October 1928, DWRP, Box 407, Image 93.

likely to offend the English public'.³⁰ This meant sanitizing (and in some cases even removing) the homosexual elements of the league's remit in the London conference materials. Haire was very keen that the medical and scientific minds of Britain be mobilized in order to raise the status of sex reform in Britain, away from a reputation of sex-mad liberal propaganda, to one of dispassionate scientific fact. He had previously written to Havelock-Ellis that 'whether one agrees or not, the fact remains that the English Medical Profession is a powerful priesthood, and one will attain one's end more easily by working with them than against them'.³¹

Once London had been decided as the venue, Haire got to work recruiting influential English attendees in order to raise the profile of the conference:

I think we ought to aim at mustering, at the very least, two hundred English members of the Congress. It is only a matter of getting sufficient publicity. We want to get letters, or some other form of publicity, in papers like 'The Spectator', 'The Nation', 'The New Statesman' etc. Will you think over any possible way of wangling this?³²

Haire was adamant that for the conference, and indeed the movement, to succeed it must be seen as a respectable scientific outfit with the backing of the medical establishment, whilst also trying constantly to appease Russell's more politicized inclinations:

I don't know whether you will think I am biassed [*sic*], or stupid, in trying to get as many doctors in as possible. Nobody knows better than I do how stupid most doctors are; but they have a very considerable value from the point of view of impressing the public ... they can help very much in spreading and fostering a saner sexual outlook.³³

Haire and Russell's efforts to muster a suitably impressive list of supporters for the conference paid off; Russell later remarked that 'if anyone wishes to know who were the standard-bearers of progressive opinion in the chief European countries at that date, the index of the supporters is a remarkable guide'.³⁴ As the list grew, Haire printed supporter's names around the edges of the congress pamphlet and notepaper which seemed to impress the right people:

'the Lancet put a notice about the Congress in this week without us asking them to; just as a result of the pamphlet ... I think that is rather a good sign. It looks as though the window-dressing has been a success. The big names on the supporters list are telling.'³⁵

The conference was not open to the public, but Haire wanted to make sure that both the medical public and the public at large were very much aware that it was happening, and that it had support from all the right people. With his 'window dressing' Haire wanted quite literally to frame people's perceptions of the league, to force the public to view the conference and the league through a scientific, intellectual and rational frame.

³⁰ Undated typewritten note from Haire to Russell, DWRP, Box 407, Image 71.

³¹ Haire to Havelock-Ellis, 20 August 1923, Norman Haire archive, Fisher Library, Sydney University, Box 3.

³² Haire to Russell, 12 January 1929, DWRP, Box 407, Image 121.

³³ Haire to Russell, 27 February 1929, DWRP, Box 407, Image 148.

³⁴ Dora Russell, *The Tamarisk Tree: My Quest for Liberty and Love*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1975, p. 217.

³⁵ Haire to Russell, undated, DWRP, Box 407, Image 182.

Conferences, then, are as much about presenting a community to the public(s) as they are about creating and sustaining that community. Public perception was absolutely key. Through all his cadging, cajoling, planning and placating, Haire was working very hard to present a united rational scientifically informed community. But conferences are about human interaction, and what makes them important for community formation is often the irrational elements – the atmospheres, the feelings, the friendships, the impromptu happenings. Moreover, Haire was attempting to curate this image of a united and enlightened community in the face of fierce internal discord. Albert Moll (a German psychiatrist who was considered one of the founders of medical psychology and sexology), for example, was bad-mouthing the congress to his friends in Germany and England. He accused the league of being unscientific and ‘unduly interested in abnormalities’, i.e. homosexuality.³⁶ Haire considered this a very unscrupulous move as ‘nothing else could be so successful in frightening off English scientists’.³⁷ Moll was very much against the conflation of sexual science with politicized sexual reform – ‘who does not understand the difference [between] a conference for sexual reform and a conference for sex research, is lost to science’³⁸ – and accused Marcus Hirschfeld of being a dangerous agitator rather than a serious scientist. Moll’s *Internationale Gesellschaft für Sexualforschung* (International Society for Sexual Research), unlike the WLSR (which had a large lay membership), was intended strictly as a forum for sexual science.³⁹

Haire was particularly disgruntled by Moll’s snub as he himself was aligned with Moll’s medicalized view of sex, but he was also very aware that the WLSR was a political organization as well as a scientific one, and that some of the more political members needed to be tactfully placated rather than publicly scorned. Haire understood the need for cross-disciplinarity in sexology, but he was committed to the scientific route as the best means of gaining legitimacy and he was determinedly attempting to make the 1929 conference as scientific as possible. It was therefore infuriating to him to be undermined by others in the movement who were unwilling to see past internal differences and give their support to the conference as a means of furthering the movement.

Moll’s scepticism of the conference dissuaded several other high-profile medical men for fear of being labelled political propagandists. In January 1929 Haire wrote to Russell to say that he had been to Edinburgh to see Professor Francis Albert Eley Crew (a geneticist) to invite him to speak at the conference, but Crew had responded by saying that although he was ‘entirely sympathetic’ to the cause of the congress he couldn’t be affiliated with a propagandist congress. Crew was arranging Moll’s conference on sexual science to be held in Edinburgh the following year and the university was already giving him trouble for it.⁴⁰ Here again the ideas of political propaganda and scientific knowledge are presented as separate and very different entities. The WLSR wanted to bring the two together. The conference was certainly an exercise in propagandist agitation, and was attended by a large cohort of Labour activists, intellectuals and progressive reformers. But the 1929 conference was also a key opportunity to cast sex reform in England as a serious science and therefore a legitimate cause. Russell wanted to allow political activists greater access to the medical arguments being made by practitioners, and Haire wanted the chorus of intellectual and political activist voices speaking in favour of sex reform to be legitimized and

³⁶ Haire to Russell, 21 February 1929, DWRP, Box 407, Image 142.

³⁷ Haire to Russell, 21 February 1929, DWRP, Box 407, Image 142.

³⁸ Albert Moll quoted in Volkmar Sigusch, ‘The sexologist Albert Moll: between Sigmund Freud and Magnus Hirschfeld’, *Medical History* (2012) 56, pp. 184–200, 196.

³⁹ Sigusch, *op. cit.* (38). Also see Ralf Dose, ‘The World League for Sexual Reform: possible approaches’, *Journal for the History of Sexuality* (2003) 12, pp. 1–15.

⁴⁰ Haire to Russell, 29 January 1929, DWRP, Box 407, Image 132.

led by the medical establishment in order that the public might recognize the importance of sex reform in society.

In the end the conference had many more medical supporters than it did medical participants, but still about half of the programme was made up of papers given by doctors (forty-five of ninety-two papers), and doctors were certainly prioritized in the programme. Haire's careful marginalization of lay figures betrays his desire to bolster the perception of the conference as a forum for medical science. For example, Stella Browne was relegated in place of more medicalized papers on birth control: Haire wrote to Russell, 'I dislike Stella Browne intensely, but I do not quite see how we can stop her reading a paper ... [However,] we can arrange her place on the programme in the most inconspicuous and unfavourable position.'⁴¹

In his careful managing of the more politically fiery characters at the conference, Haire sought to create a conference that would be regarded as rationally scientific, and free of the passions of political argument. Through the months leading up to the conference, and during the event itself, Haire sought to manage all these various conflicting passions and personalities, and he was acutely aware of the material aspects of the conference, and the ways in which they might affect the perception of the proceedings.

Choosing the venue, for example, betrayed Haire's careful curating of the image of the conference. These details were not incidental; it was not simply a matter of finding a room that was big enough or cheap enough (although those were certainly considerations), but rather these details could dictate public perception of the conference and by extension the league. 'I am writing today to get the prices of various halls ... fairly central, or at any rate, in a neighbourhood where visitors would be likely to find reasonably cheap and comfortable hotel accommodation', Haire wrote to Russell in January 1929.⁴² A few weeks later he wrote to say that he had made enquires via the anthropologist Bronisław Kasper Malinowski 'asking if there is any possibility of cadging, (or, if we must, hiring) accommodation for the Congress at the London School of Economics ... it would give [the congress] a certain cachet in the eyes of some people if it were held there'.⁴³ The LSE was soon scrapped as a possible venue, though, after Malinowski warned Haire that William Beveridge (then the director of the LSE and future architect of the British welfare state) was 'madly conservative about sex' and would never agree to the congress.⁴⁴

The headquarters of the British Medical Association in Tavistock Square was also entertained as a possibility because, 'in the eyes of certain people, it would give it a cachet of "respectability,"' through its association with the medical profession.⁴⁵ Haire also considered the Quaker meeting house on Euston Road, but it was too expensive.⁴⁶ In February 1929 Haire wrote again to Russell:

are there not some Labour organisations which have premises in the Euston Road, or thereabouts, where large Congresses are held? Could we get one of these? Or do you think that this might identify the whole Congress, in the minds of some stupid people, with the Labour movement, and thus damage it?⁴⁷

⁴¹ Haire to Russell, 15 January 1929, DWRP, Box 407, Image 124.

⁴² Haire to Russell, 25 October 1928, DWRP, Box 407, Images 93–4.

⁴³ Haire to Russell, 13 November 1928, DWRP, Box 407, Image 95.

⁴⁴ Haire to Russell, 19 January 1929, DWRP, Box 407, Image 128.

⁴⁵ Haire to Russell, 14 November 1928, DWRP, Box 407, Image 97.

⁴⁶ Haire to Russell, 9 January 1929, DWRP, Box 407, Image 115.

⁴⁷ Haire to Russell, 27 February 1929, DWRP, Box 407, Image 150.

Of course, the league was very much aligned with the Labour movement (of which Russell herself was a part) – it was about advocating political and social reform on a scientific basis, but again Haire was steadfast that the conference must not be seen as propagandist. He wanted a scientific conference in order to command scientific respectability. In the end Wigmore Hall, a prestigious music venue in Marylebone, was chosen as the venue, on account of its respectable but politically neutral reputation, and its excellent acoustics.

Haire's attention to detail is striking. He and Russell exchanged endless letters about the particulars of the venue, the programme, the dining arrangements and the seating arrangements. Haire suggests that they might assign seats so that 'each one will always sit in the same place and be easy to find'.⁴⁸ He went on, 'I suggest putting tables across in front of the first row for the reporters and you and me. I suggest that you and I should take seats 15 & 16 so as to be near each other and near the platform and near the aisle.'⁴⁹ Haire was clearly a shrewd micromanager, and one with a very keen eye for the PR of the conference and of the league. In choosing a venue for the more informal *converzione* he struggled to find somewhere suitable as many possible venues were 'too dear or insist on evening dress and many of the people won't have any with them'.⁵⁰ Haire really seems to have considered how every tiny detail of the conference might impact its proceedings. In the end the Victoria ballroom at the Hotel Cecil was chosen and the *converzione* went ahead on the Wednesday evening of the conference.

I am far from the first to note that Norman Haire was a particularly meticulous and ferocious organizer.⁵¹ Others have characterized Haire's careful manoeuvring in the world of sexual science as purely self-serving, emphasizing that he wanted the conference to succeed in order to gain the social capital necessary to make it as a gentleman doctor on Harley Street.⁵² While it is certainly true that Haire sought to position himself as a leading voice in the movement and was by all accounts a divisive figure – sycophantic, egotistical and often tactless – he was committed to sexual reform. Haire was not just in it for the celebrity, even his rival Stella Browne praised his 'indefatigable' efforts in service of the movement.⁵³ In his obsessive micromanaging and astute eye for conference PR, Haire embodied the desire to use the scientific conference in order to make radical political projects and bold societal transformation respectable. He wanted sexology to be respectable so that people could access advice and treatment and so that the wealth of knowledge and research still so often characterized as seditious whisperings could be made widely available. Haire threw himself into the organization of this conference far more rigorously than he did any other activity of the league. He recognized this scientific conference to be absolutely fundamental in the successful curation of a delicately balanced broad-based community of sex reformers.

The conference in action

So the conference went ahead, from 8 to 14 September 1929, with more than 350 attendees.⁵⁴ Papers were given across six days, from Sunday evening to Friday, so that 'the

⁴⁸ Haire to Russell, 28 June 1929, DWRP, Box 407, Image 311.

⁴⁹ Haire to Russell, 28 June 1929, DWRP, Box 407, Image 311.

⁵⁰ Haire to Russell, 30 August 1929, DWRP, Box 407, Image 363.

⁵¹ See Diane Wyndham, *Norman Haire and the Study of Sex*, Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2012; Crozier, opera cit. (8).

⁵² Ivan Crozier suggests that Haire's major motivation was 'to promote a position for himself in the sexual medical world of London and Europe in the 1920s and '30s'. See Crozier, 'Becoming a sexologist', op. cit. (8), p. 300.

⁵³ F.W. Stella Browne, 'Impressions of the third International Congress for the World League for Sexual Reform', *Critic and Guide* (1929) 27, pp. 483–6, 485.

⁵⁴ Russell, op. cit. (34), p. 217.

week-end before and/or the week-end after would give the foreign visitors the opportunity for looking round a bit'.⁵⁵ The proceedings were lengthy – on Monday 9 September the first session began at 9.30 a.m., and last session did not finish until 10.30 p.m., followed by a film screening at 11.15 p.m.⁵⁶ Magnus Hirschfeld formally opened the conference with a presidential address reaffirming his commitment to his personal motto: *Per scientiam ad justitiam*: 'Through science to justice'.⁵⁷

It is regrettable that we do not have detailed accounts of the conference in action to match the detail of Haire and Russell's accounts of the organization. Instead, we can only access snippets of recollection, and engage in informed speculation. Trying to get at the life of a scientific conference is vital in prompting us to think of these events as public spaces. The lived experience of a conference is where theoretical, rhetorical and intellectual positions and ideas are animated and tested through human interaction. The intimate and impromptu moments are important. For example, day 5 of the conference, Thursday 12 September, was given over to papers about sex and censorship. And so, fittingly, the conference included an evening escapade evading British censorship laws to show an illegal film about abortion practices in Soviet Russia – this was a challenge to sex censorship in action at the conference. For Russell, and no doubt for others, the intimate and bodily experiences of these moments are the parts of the conference that created the most lasting impressions:

A joyous lark of the Congress was the showing of the Russian abortion film. Obviously, it would not pass the Censor. Norman Haire and I arranged a private showing in a studio at the end of someone's garden and special tickets were issued to bona fide members of the Congress ... The press pestered Norman and me with enquires; we were even shadowed on the day of the event and had to do some more or less skilful evasion, leaping in and out of cars amid much giggling.⁵⁸

As well as a packed programme of papers and illicit film screenings, the conference also showcased scientific techniques and technologies, which were performed and presented to attendees. On day 3, Tuesday 10 September, guests were offered an evening visit to the Cromer Welfare and Sunlight Centre Birth Control Department, where they could tour the facilities and see how new sexual-science technologies and practices were being implemented in clinical settings. Also on day 3, Ernst Gräfenberg, the German gynaecologist after whom the G-spot is named, gave a paper about his Gräfenberg ring, an early version of what later became known as an intrauterine device (IUD).⁵⁹ He presented the device at the conference as part of what Vera Brittain (writer, feminist and nurse) remembered as 'a fine display of modern contraceptives',⁶⁰ and *The Lancet* praised Gräfenberg's presentation as deserving 'the most impartial consideration'.⁶¹

Like many of the other conferences explored in this special issue, the proceedings of the WLSR conference were also an exercise in intellectual internationalism. 'Every country in Europe, except Portugal, was represented; included in the Committee also were

⁵⁵ Haire to Russell, 13 November 1928, DWRP, Box 407, Image 96.

⁵⁶ Full programme of the WLSR 1929 London congress, IMP, CP/IND/MONT/4/9.

⁵⁷ Dora Russell recounts Hirschfeld's opening address fondly in her autobiography. Russell, op. cit. (34), p. 219.

⁵⁸ Russell, op. cit. (34), pp. 219–20.

⁵⁹ For more on Gräfenberg's device see Caroline Rusterholz, 'Testing the Gräfenberg ring in interwar Britain: Norman Haire, Helena Wright, and the debate over statistical evidence, side effects, and intra-uterine contraception', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* (2017) 72, pp. 448–67.

⁶⁰ Vera Brittain, *Testament of Experience: An Autobiographical Story of the Years 1925–1950*, London: Virago, 1979 (first published 1957), p. 56–7.

⁶¹ 'The technique of birth control', *The Lancet*, 21 September 1929, p. 623.

British India, Canada, Egypt, Iceland, Liberia, the Malay States, the United States, Latvia, Argentina, Chile. Alexandra Kollontai sat for the Soviet Union.⁶² Papers were given in English, German, French and Esperanto.⁶³ Indeed, Jack Flügal (a writer and psychologist who helped with the organization of the conference) delivered his welcome address in Esperanto.⁶⁴ The choice to include Esperanto as one of the official languages was clearly a political choice, and one that signalled a commitment to internationalism. Dora Russell later explained, ‘to me this Congress had meant more than I can say ... it had, moreover, expressed an internationalism that went beyond mere politics, and kept open the channel between us and the Soviet Union still blocked by politicians’.⁶⁵

Russian involvement with the conference (five Russian doctors gave papers) was particularly important to Dora Russell. Russell was an enthusiastic supporter of the Soviet Union and remained so all her life. In 1920 she had travelled to Russia in support of workers’ movements and attended the Second World Congress of the Comintern. She returned convinced that the country’s progressive approach to gender, birth control and abortion (in 1929 the Soviet Union was the only country with legal abortion access) could be used as a model for reforms across the world. For Russell, then, the 1929 WLSR conference was not only a way of presenting sexual science as a ‘real’ science, but also a way of employing the methods and temperament of science in an effort to present a rational and compelling case for internationalism and East–West collaboration.

The conference also provided an official context through which personal networks and projects could be showcased, and informal connections made. Russell’s interest in the Soviet Union led her to invite several members of the Russian conference delegation to visit her experimental school the weekend after the formal proceedings. In 1927 Russell, with her husband Bertrand, had founded Beacon Hill School in Sussex. The school was in many ways another manifestation of the ‘scientific spirit’ that Russell brought to her role with the WLSR conference. At Beacon Hill Russell was committed both to the teaching of sexual science, and to the scientific method. The curriculum covered sex education and instilled a positive attitude to sex.⁶⁶ And, importantly, the teaching of sex and of all other subjects would celebrate scientific knowledge. This was a scientific, rational, libertarian and progressive education which taught children to leave behind the superstitious and irrational views of previous generations. The school’s commitment to the teachings of science and the scientific process seemed to impress Russell’s Russian colleagues:

Drs Gens and Batkis of the Russian delegation came down to visit our school. Our methods did not differ widely from what was then the practice in Soviet schools. But one thing did impress them, our ‘lab’ in which we acquainted small children with science by the ‘magic’ of simple experiments.⁶⁷

Throughout the six days of the conference, the proceedings were reported on by several press outlets. No doubt to Norman Haire’s glee, the response from the scientific press was generally favourable, and many reporters noted that while the conference and its speakers certainly had political motives, the real success of the meeting was the salience of science. The *BMJ* reported that while some of the papers presented at the conference ‘are based on the uncertain foundation of sentiment rather than on the firm rock of

⁶² Russell, op. cit. (34), p. 217.

⁶³ Full programme of the WLSR 1929 London congress, IMP, CP/IND/MONT/4/9.

⁶⁴ Russell, op. cit. (34), p. 218.

⁶⁵ Russell, op. cit. (34), p. 220.

⁶⁶ Carla Hustak, ‘Love, sex, and happiness in education: the Russells, Beacon Hill, and teaching “sex-love” in England, 1927–1943’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* (2013) 22, p. 446–73.

⁶⁷ Russell, op. cit. (34), p. 220.

science', generally the conference was 'endeavouring on the whole to consider the difficult problems with which it is specially concerned in a scientific and commendably dispassionate spirit'.⁶⁸ The following year the proceedings of the conference were published and *Nature* gave a similar summary of the value of the contributions: 'the value of the papers in this collection naturally varies. Feeling themselves under a cloud of opposition, the writers occasionally adopt a propagandist attitude ... On the whole, however, the scientific attitude may be said to prevail'.⁶⁹

However, the medical press generally ignored the key issues addressed by lay reformist speakers at the conference – prostitution, birth control access for the poor, censorship, issues around sexuality – and the wider press spent a disproportionate amount of space on the big personalities and public intellectuals present. The paper given by George Bernard Shaw, the Fabian and playwright, on sex and dress sense, for example, went very well reported.⁷⁰ *The Times* published reports each day of the conference, giving a brief summary of the more controversial topics.⁷¹ Reformist publications, as might be expected, focused on the causes to which they were most attached. The *Woman's Leader and Common Cause* concluded that the conference contained 'as varied a mixture of sense and nonsense as might be expected', but that 'if the congress can be said to have expressed a collective outlook ... it embodied a demand for greater freedom of sex expression and a strongly critical attitude to the social and religious institutions by which such matters are at present regulated'.⁷²

Conclusion

At the heart of the 1929 conference was a battle for the strategy of sexology. Norman Haire was concerned that sexology's association with disparate causes and contexts might dilute its persuasive power, and therefore damage the movement. He used the conference to prove the scientific basis of sex reform to the public. And yet in many ways the precise agenda of the league remained unfathomable. The paper given by George Bernard Shaw that went so well reported contained a discussion of what exactly was meant by sex reform:

[Shaw] said he would not touch the question as to what sexual reform meant. Every-body was a sexual reformer. That was to say anybody who had any idea of the subject at all. 'Even the Pope is a prominent sexual reformer,' he said, adding 'Austrian nudists are sexual reformers, and the consequence is that if you had a general conference of all the people who are demanding sexual reform you would have a curious cross party organisation.'⁷³

Shaw well sums up how, despite the efforts of Norman Haire, for many the multidisciplinary and multifarious conglomeration that made up the sex reform movement remained largely unfathomable, somewhat comical, and often unconvincingly scientific. The debate about what exactly sex reform means, and whether or not it is helpful to expand the definition of sexology, remains central for historians of sex and sexuality. Just as Haire, despite wanting to approach the topic from as many angles as possible, worried that stretching the remit of sexology too far from medical science might damage potential

⁶⁸ 'The scientific study of sex problems', *British Medical Journal*, 14 September 1929, p. 508.

⁶⁹ 'Our bookshelf', *Nature*, 18 April 1931, p. 587.

⁷⁰ E.g. "'G.B.S.'" talks on sex appeal', *Western Daily Press* (Yeovil, England), 14 September 1929, p. 9; 'Clothes create sex appeal', *Aberdeen Journal*, 14 September 1929, p. 7.

⁷¹ E.g. 'Sexual reform congress', *The Times*, 11 September 1929; 'League for sexual reform', *The Times*, 9 September 1929.

⁷² 'World League for Sexual Reform', *Woman's Leader and the Common Cause* (20 September 1929) 21(3), p. 245.

⁷³ "'G.B.S.'" talks on sex appeal', op. cit. (70), p. 9.

reform, historians continue to debate how best to study such a movement and how far to cast the sexology net without rendering the term meaningless. For example, Ivan Crozier argues that ‘we should look at sexological texts as belonging to a specific field ... a *sui generis* scientific field’, whereas Heike Bauer contends that

sexology was constituted from the contributions of medical professionals, legal and social scientists, anthropologists, social reformers as well as authors, literary critics and all kinds of cultural commentators ... Sexual debates as we know them today emerged on the intersections between these different fields rather than just within a distinct, clearly disciplined sexual science.⁷⁴

I would suggest that the study of scientific conferences has something to offer here. This article has shown that examining how the 1929 organizers defined their sex-reforming remit in relation to other sex organizations, how they curated the conference to this end, how the participants understood the platform on which they spoke, what version of sexology the organizers hoped the conference would propel into the public imagination, and to what extent this was achieved all help to show that sexology has been an elastic concept ever since its inception. Those involved with the WLSR were divided as to whether sexology should be purely about science proper, or whether social, political, emotional and cultural concerns should also be key in shaping the field. The intricacies of the organization of the 1929 conference show that in many ways the debates about scope and strategy were often more a result of personality clashes and tactical disagreements than about strict scientific definitions. Or rather that the question of what counted as ‘proper science’ became a way for sex reformers to thrash out the intellectual, political and disciplinary biases that made strategizing so difficult. In other words, the conference allows a window onto the mechanisms via which members of the sex reform community struggled to find a common approach to sex in society.

The World League for Sexual Reform and the sex reform movement as a combined movement did not survive the 1930s. The Nazis destroyed Hirschfeld’s institute for sexual science in Berlin, and the threat of fascism across Europe had brought the work of the WLSR to a halt by 1935.⁷⁵ The fundamental premise for the work of the league was the possibility of convincing governments and publics of the scientific rationality of sex reform. Following the economic crash of Western capitalist economies, the threat to democracy from fascism, and the reversals of sex and family planning policy in the USSR, this hope seemed lost. By the 1940s it was single-issue campaigns, particularly those for birth control, that continued the work of challenging social attitudes and promoting scientific understanding of sex. Given that Orwell’s disparaging characterization of sex reformers and their fellow travellers as half-baked cranks came eight years after the league’s 1929 conference, it seems that these inter-war sex reformers could never quite shake their unscientific image in Britain, and as the 1930s wore on they appeared increasingly ill-suited to confront the challenges of fascism.

What’s more, Haire’s desire to cast the sex reform movement in Britain as a medical movement was consistently challenged right up until the league’s demise in 1935. Indeed, the friendship that Haire and Russell forged through the work of organizing the 1929 conference was finally broken by this central tension. In 1935, as the British branch of the league was struggling financially and suffering increasing internal discord, Haire wrote to Russell,

⁷⁴ Heike Bauer and Ivan Crozier, ‘Sexology, historiography, citation, embodiment: a review and (frank) exchange’, *History of the Human Sciences*, 2017, at www.histhum.com/sexology-historiography-citation-embodiment-a-review-and-frank-exchange (accessed October 2022).

⁷⁵ See Erwin J. Haeberle, ‘Swastika, pink triangle and yellow star: the destruction of sexology and the persecution of homosexuals in Nazi Germany’, *Journal of Sex Research* (1981) 17, pp. 270–87.

You are the focussing point of a section of the group in the British branch of the W.L.S.R., which is dissatisfied with the work we have done during the last three years, and which wants to subordinate sexual reform aims to political considerations ... In my own view, such a policy is not in consonance with the Constitution of the League, and while I am chairman I shall oppose it with all my power.⁷⁶

Though short-lived, and ultimately unsuccessful in its aims, the WLSR provides the historian of conferences – of cultures of scientific and intellectual communities – with an example of how members of an organization, seeking to be understood as scientific, perform that identity through conferencing. Science was seen as inherently more respectable than the sordid machinations of political agitation, and the scientific conference was a way to bring the scientific method to bear on social and political questions. The WLSR was based in scientific understanding, but the science of sex was very often lost under a cloud of popular misunderstandings and disparaging assumptions about liberal progressivism and sex propaganda. The interwar period saw the struggle for sexual science to be recognized as a legitimate scientific field in England, and the struggle within the movement to determine exactly what was the most scientific way to approach sex. The organizers of the 1929 conference marshalled the appropriate scientific ‘window dressing’, through which the public could view a carefully curated scene. And the scene they presented foregrounded perhaps the most familiar and recognizable symbols of science at the disposal of the organizers, and certainly the one most cherished by Norman Haire, namely practitioners of medical science.

In reality, though, sexual science drew on approaches and methods from across the social and natural sciences – biology, anthropology, medicine, philosophy, sociology and psychology – and beyond, and all of this was represented at the 1929 conference. It was an interdisciplinary conference for an interdisciplinary field. And yet Norman Haire was convinced of the need for scientific posturing in order to publicly make the case for the medicalization of sexual knowledge. In marshalling the recognizable trappings of science at the conference, therefore, the organizers exemplified the broader struggles of the sex reform movement. This was a struggle between the desire for advances in understandings of sexual science and the desire for legitimacy. The former relied absolutely on cross-disciplinary exchange between knowledge producers of various types, yet the latter could only be secured via the proper medical authority. The management and machinations of the WLSR 1929 international conference, therefore, are a story about how we judge forms of knowledge and, ultimately, what constitutes science.

As for Norman Haire and Dora Russell’s own experience of the conference, Haire wrote to Russell a couple of weeks after the event to say, ‘I feel like a corpse and need complete rest.’⁷⁷ He asked, ‘have you recovered from the strain of the congress, or have you crocked up too? Jerdan [Haire’s secretary] has lost about a stone and a half and is suicidal at the moment. Never again!’⁷⁸ It had clearly been an exhausting show.

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⁷⁶ Haire to Russell, 12 May 1935, DWRP, Box 8, Image 14.

⁷⁷ Haire to Russell, 17 September 1929, DWRP, Box 407, Image 408.

⁷⁸ Haire to Russell, 6 October 1929, DWRP, Box 407, Image 426.

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