



## **A dream in waiting. The first two decades of the IUPAP**

**Jaume Navarro**

**Ikerbasque Research Professor, University of the Basque Country**

### **Abstract**

The early decades of the IUPAP seem rather uneventful. Formally established between 1922 and 1923, the international association of physicists did not have the booming activity of other unions like the astronomical, chemical or geological unions. After a first rather uneventful presidency of William Henry Bragg (1922-1931), Robert Millikan's election at the General Assembly in 1931 promised to impinge some momentum to the Union. But the Great Depression shattered some major plans, especially the proposed next General Assembly and major international conference in physics due to take place in Chicago in 1933 during the "Century of Progress International Exposition". The lack of funds watered down that meeting, after which there was a general feeling that "the Union might disintegrate if it did not hold a meeting which would demonstrate that it had both vitality and a real work to perform". In a letter to Henri Abraham, the long-standing General Secretary since the beginning of the Union, Millikan was slightly more optimistic: "I myself see a large amount of useful activity in the field of symbols, units and nomenclature", a commission created under his presidency and run by Richard Glazebrook. And yet, he acknowledged that "the most important function of the Union will be the organizing and holding of international congresses".[1] Finally, one such event took place in 1934, in London and Cambridge, partly sponsored by the IUPAP. In that meeting attempts were made to have Niles Bohr as the new president, but his demands for true internationalism could not be met and he rejected the offer. The fate of international unions in general, and of the IUPAP in particular, was still not clear.

*Jaume Navarro* is Ikerbasque Research Professor at the University of the Basque Country (Spain). Trained in physics and in philosophy, his academic career has focused on the history of physics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and on the historiography of the sciences. He has published extensively on the intellectual and cultural transformation of physics at the beginning of the twentieth century. He has published a monograph in Cambridge University Press (*A History of the Electron. J.J. and G.P. Thomson*, 2012) In 2017, he was elected president of the Commission for the History of Physics (CHP) of the IUHPST/DHST. During his presidency, the IUPAP and the IUHPST/DHST agreed a Memorandum of Understanding to transform the CHP into an inter-union commission for the History and Philosophy of Physics, of which he was elected president in 2021. He is currently coordinating together with Roberto Lalli the *IUPAP 100 History Project*.

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[1] Millikan to Abraham, August 4, 1933. Millikan Papers, Reel 12.

