



* This poster continues a conversation which is initiated in the June 2019 edition of *Viewpoint: The Magazine of the British Society for the History of Science*. The issue commemorates the 50th anniversary of the 1969 Stonewall uprising in New York by exploring LGBTQ+ issues in HSTM.

1. Abstract

This poster explores an important shift in medico-scientific approaches towards theorising and discussing sex variations (including intersexualities, transformations of sex, and non-reproductive sexual behaviours) which is discernible in Edwardian Britain. It describes how “English literary sexology” (Bauer), usually associated with sexologists such as Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis, was superseded in cultural hegemony as revolutionary discoveries in genetics and endocrinology drove a burgeoning of elite interest in the biology of sex determination, sex variations, and sexuality. The poster focuses on a display of anatomical specimens relating to avian sex transformation (or “reversal”) which was exhibited at the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons in the summer of 1914. The exhibit demonstrates how new scientific technologies relating to genetics and endocrinology were being brought to bare on sex variations in Britain through the medium of non-human animal subjects. The poster further examines how the new biology of sex was branded (or narrated) as a particularly British scientific pursuit, not just within the biological and medical professions but more popularly.

2. Hirschfeld in London

Historians including Ivan Crozier and Lesley Hall have long described the muted, often hostile, reception to modernist sexology in late-Victorian and early-twentieth-century Britain. As sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Magnus Hirschfeld enjoyed relatively successful careers on the Continent, Havelock Ellis, Britain’s most famous sexologist, was heavily censored. His book *Sexual Inversion* (coauthored with John Addington Symonds and first published in Britain in 1897) was outlawed and all his major sexological works were subsequently only published in the United States.



Hirschfeld’s “Sexual Transitions” display, photographed as it later existed at the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft in Berlin, but originally conceived and constructed for the 17th International Congress of Medicine in London in 1913.

Hirschfeld thought that one sign of change was his own “Sexual Transitions” exhibit which formed part of the temporary Medical Museum curated by Arthur Keith, the eminent Conservator of the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons, at the 17th International Congress of Medicine held in London in August 1913. Lesley Hall has described how Hirschfeld’s presence in Britain inspired a group of homophile writers and physicians to establish a new sex reform group, the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology. The Society existed until the 1940s, but its membership and impact were always modest. Similarly, the reception of Hirschfeld’s exhibit amongst professional scientists and physicians was tangibly muted. His presence at the Congress is barely mentioned in the various publications produced for the event and neither did he receive any notices in the British medical press or national newspapers.

“In recent times, signs have been increasing that also in England the strong wall of hypocritical prejudice, which stands between theoretical science and the practical following of its findings, is beginning to crumble a little. It could not but be that the seeds which Westermarck, Ellis, Carpenter, and especially Darwin sowed would sooner or later bear fruit even in the stony earth of England.”

—Magnus Hirschfeld, 1914 (trans. Michael A. Lombardi-Nash, 2000)

3. The New Biology of Sex in Britain

Hirschfeld’s “Sexual Transitions” display may have had a subtler impact of British biologists, but explicit evidence to this effect is wanting. It is nonetheless remarkable that a few months following the Congress, in the summer of 1914, Arthur Keith curated his own exhibition in the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons which showcased Britain’s contributions to the new genetics and endocrinology of sex variations. The English physiologist F. H. A. Marshall had broached the subject in his important book *The Physiology of Reproduction* (1910), but Keith’s intervention marks an even more significant shift towards establishing the new biology of sex as an especially British scientific pursuit, prompting new responses, and new sexological narratives, to subjects which had long been sidelined by most British biologists and physicians.

Keith’s display focused on the subject of avian sex transformation, several studies of which had been made by the Museum’s Pathological Curator, Samuel George Shattock, and the physician and anthropologist Charles Gabriel Seligmann between 1904 and 1914. These studies evidence how new actors (such as animal breeders and laboratory workers) and new scientific technologies associated with genetics and endocrinology were increasingly being brought to bear on sexological subjects, especially sex variations. Although ostensibly applied to non-human animal subjects, Shattock and Seligmann explicitly drew analogies between the birds they studied and sex transformations and sexual inversion in humans, bringing the new biology of sex into close juxtaposition to Continental sexology but without the liberationist agendas of sexologists such as Ellis and Hirschfeld.



Image: © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford

Plate of a tail feather from a common cock pheasant, examined by Shattock and Seligmann around 1904, in which a partial transformation of plumage towards the female-typical type at the proximal end is exhibited.

4. Great British Sexology? - I

Keith’s sexological exhibition was remarkable in that he displayed sex-transformative pheasants which had been purposefully sourced from the royal Sandringham estate with the blessing of the king (George V). The details of the dissections of these birds were scientifically unremarkable, suchlike had long been described in Continental scientific journals, but the royal seal of approval offered some authoritative endorsement to the pursuit of sexological subjects which had previously been repudiated by most British biologists and physicians and publicly derided by the media.

5. Great British Sexology? - II

Despite the prestigious provenance of the royal pheasants, they were not Keith’s star exhibit. That honour went to a 140-year-old exhibit of a sex-transformative peahen, originally described by the Scottish surgeon and naturalist John Hunter in 1780. With the new biology of sex proceeding at a rapid pace, especially in Germany and the United States, the antique exhibit worked to establish a (false) narrative of continuous British sexological endeavor stretching from Hunter to 1914. In this way, Keith circumvented any vexed entanglements with Havelock Ellis and the Continental sexologists whilst staking out an impressive claim to some competitive and highly prized scientific territory.

6. Pop Sexology

Unlike Hirschfeld’s earlier exhibit, Keith’s display was widely reported, not just in the medical press but in Britain’s national and regional newspapers and internationally. It was, in this important sense, momentous, establishing medico-scientific studies of sex—sexology—as a concern of Britain’s media for the first time. *The Times* (2 July 1914) set the pace, leading with a palpable nod to the paper’s middle-class readers that the new biology of sex was now a legitimate and respectable object of British scientific and otherwise elite discourse.



Buoyed by the king’s unassailable gender credentials, the burgeoning biology of sex subsequently became a staple feature of newspaper reporting in Britain, encouraged by a new generation of science popularisers including F. A. E. Crew and Julian Huxley.

7. Sexual Inversion Bows Out

For his part, Havelock Ellis extensively revised and updated *Sexual Inversion*, a third and final edition being published in 1915. He incorporated the latest ideas of Continental sexologists such as Hirschfeld and Sigmund Freud, but also included studies by biologists—a substantial adaptation on earlier editions—whose researches he believed confirmed his long-standing view that sexual inversion was innate. With its bold fusion of Continental sexology and the new biology of sex, the third edition of *Sexual Inversion* was one of the most progressive and comprehensive sexological tomes in English through the first half of the 20th century, but it was barely noticed. The book was only ever published in the United States and its impact was negligible. By the time Ellis made his revisions, the new breed of modernist physiologists had successfully laid claim to the legitimate study and promotion of sex variations, with far-reaching consequences for the pursuit of sexology in Britain thereafter.

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