

CHAPTER ELEVEN BECOMING A PUBLIC HISTORIAN

Public history is a burgeoning field that employs many historians. Historians can find employment at historic sites, in small and large museums, and archives in both the private and public sectors. Novels, plays, and documentary and fiction television shows and movies, also considered forms of public history, often rely on the work of historians in a variety of capacities – as researchers, writers, and talking heads. Many public historians are self-employed, contracting out their expertise on a diverse array of projects.

There are many routes to public history. Some people go into a Master's or PhD program with the intention of becoming public historians. Others move towards public history because an interesting job becomes available, and they successfully apply. This was the case for Rhonda L. Hinthier. She had been pursuing a tenure-track history job when the Canadian Museum of Civilization advertised for "Curator, Western Canadian History." A friend saw the posting and encouraged her to apply. She did so, was flown to Ottawa for an interview, and was offered the job because of the array of skills she had developed researching and writing her PhD dissertation and teaching Canadian history.

Public history is a varied field that offers many opportunities for exciting and rewarding intellectual engagement. Many public history jobs are academic jobs. On the job, public historians are often able to pursue their personal scholarly interests while also developing exhibitions and programming for their institution. Some public historians are encouraged, and even expected, to publish as actively as university academics. Many teach at universities or community colleges. History departments, especially those with public history programs, often actively seek practising public historians to sit on thesis committees, affiliate as research associates or adjunct professors, act as external readers, or teach courses related to their particular expertise. Some public history jobs are less academic. For those working in smaller institutions or ones that are less research oriented (which is probably the case at most Canadian institutions), historians will be expected to contribute not only to developing exhibitions, but also to other museum products. They might be asked to give group tours, design educational programming related to collections, produce web products, organize fundraisers, build exhibition cases, and handle acquisitions. Often, the smaller the institution, the more diversified the work of a historian or curator will be. Such positions can offer a public historian the chance to develop a wide range of skills and experience.

Many public historians eschew permanent institutional affiliation, choosing instead to contract their services and work on a variety of projects in different institutions. They might work as curators on one project, exhibition designers on another, or as researchers or text writers-for-hire helping to develop one or more components for an exhibition. While at times contracting can be an insecure means of earning a living, it is not without its advantages. In addition to developing broadly-defined skills and experience,

contracting offers many public historians the opportunity to negotiate a more flexible schedule and, in some cases, to exercise greater choice over the types of projects on which they will spend their time.

Finding a Job in Public History

If you are interested in going into public history but don't have a public history background or degree, fear not! While it is helpful for some types of positions, a public history degree can be quite limiting in other circumstances. Sometimes, public history programs of study are too broadly defined to offer the type of specific historical expertise that many museums or historic sites are seeking. Moreover, the research and writing skills you develop in a history PhD program are readily applicable to many public history jobs. Even without a public history degree, a skilled historian can do public history. History students hoping to practice public history should recognize the importance of studying images and artifacts as historical documents, consider developing skills in oral history and material culture, and learn about the cultural community (e.g., museums, galleries, historic sites) outside of academia.

Many public historians get their start working on part-time research contracts. These jobs can help to position you for permanent public history work. They can also be a great way to supplement your income as a student or after you have graduated; often you can structure the work to fit around your own writing or TA duties. Sometimes these opportunities are advertised, but more often, especially for smaller contracts (under \$5000), they are not. Employers of public historians often need to hire quickly to fulfill short or long-term project needs. Generally, they draw on people they already know have the interests, skills, and experience they are looking for. Networking, then, can be critical to getting your foot in the door.

Networking for public history jobs is a lot like networking for other academic jobs – at conferences, via email, at museums, and on campus. Consider joining public history professional associations that reflect your interests, like the Canadian Association for Women's Public History (CAWPH) or the National Council on Public History (NCPH). Sign up for public history listservs like H-Public or H-Museum. Finally, don't be afraid to approach individual curators or public historians for advice. They are busy, but most would be willing to meet for a coffee or take time over the phone to discuss their work, your interests, and to offer career advice. If you are interested in working for their institution, let them know and forward your cv, along with a short cover letter or email reminding them of your field of study, teaching experience, and areas in which you would be qualified to work or carry out research. Many will also willingly forward your information to colleagues who might be seeking research assistance. Volunteering can often be a good foot in the door as well. It can help you understand the internal structure of a particular organization and its procedures, databases, lingo, contacts, and projects that might be helpful in your search for a contract. Depending on your program of study, you may be able to volunteer or carry out an internship for degree credit – check with your department. SSHRC-funded postdocs can also sometimes be carried out at

museums or historic sites.

Positions in public history, permanent jobs as well as postdoctoral opportunities, internships, and research fellowships, are usually posted publicly. Institutions often advertise for curators or historians in many of the same places as tenure-track jobs, such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* or H-Net. H-Public and H-Museum are especially valuable resources for international public history opportunities. The websites of individual museums, historic sites, or government departments like Parks Canada, the Smithsonian, and the Canadian Museum of Civilization, sometimes advertise positions. Jobs are also posted at the websites of the American Association of Museums (<http://www.aam-us.org/aviso>), the Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN) www.chin.gc.ca, and the American Historical Association (www.historians.org). Students looking for summer work can sometimes find public history opportunities through the Canadian Government's Federal Student Work Experience Program. <http://jobs-emplois.gc.ca>.

In Canada, the largest employer of historians is the Canadian federal government. Many (but not all) public history jobs with the federal government require bilingual candidates, so consider brushing up on your bilingualism. Examples of the tests you will need to pass can be found at http://www.psc-cfp.gc.ca/ppc/sle_main_e.htm. For some government jobs, you need only demonstrate an aptitude for learning a second language; your employer will send you and pay for language training.

The process of applying for posted public history jobs is generally similar to that of a tenure-track job. Usually you will be asked to submit your cv and a cover letter outlining your qualifications. As noted above, the skills you develop in graduate school are readily applicable to most public history jobs. When you apply, be sure to spell out clearly in your cover letter how your particular skill set, experience, and field of study fit the position. Refer to the institution to which you are applying, and its characteristics, and indicate why you would be a good fit. The hiring committee may be made up of individuals who do not hold graduate degrees or who hold graduate degrees in fields other than history – they may not know what a history PhD candidate or recent graduate learned while pursuing their doctorate. You will need to tailor your cv and covering letter to the specific type of institution. Too strong an academic focus may actually be a deterrent for employers looking for applicants with “practical” training; you might be better off emphasizing successful projects rather than publications. Take care to follow all instructions in the job posting to the letter. Some may ask you to email or submit your application online, others may request a paper application. If a Government of Canada job posting lists the “core competencies” required for a particular position, make sure that you list them by name and indicate how you possess each one (no matter how mechanical this may make your cover letter). Failure to do so may disqualify you as an applicant. In fact, since more and more cvs are pre-screened by computer, yours might be quickly rejected if certain keywords are missing.

The Job Interview

Generally speaking, job interviews for public history positions are relatively simple compared to those for tenure-track jobs. Usually, they take about an hour or two and do not require a job talk or lecture. For certain government jobs, standardized testing may be involved (though it may be scheduled for a later date). Don't be afraid to inquire about the nature of the interview process – the individual who schedules your meeting should be able to give you a general idea of what to anticipate. To prepare, think about how to convey your area of expertise practically and to a popular audience. Consult job interview manuals for general advice about a professional interview. Be sure to investigate the institution so you can go into the interview informed about the type of public history it does. Plan to dress up – a suit is usually an appropriate choice. Bring extra copies of your cv, publications, conference presentations, teaching dossier, public history projects, and any other material that you might draw on in the interview to highlight how well-suited you are for the job.

On the day of the meeting, you may be interviewed by one person or by a team. Some interviewers may be academics; others might be representatives of the human resources department or other departments with an interest in your candidacy. Always keep in mind who the interviewers are when addressing their questions, and do not be condescending. A mixed audience or a solo non-academic interviewer will not be impressed by professional jargon, no matter how erudite you think you sound. Be straightforward and clear in your responses. Always prepare some questions for the interviewers: ask them about their institution, its direction, and how the job opening fits with its mandate. It is also reasonable to ask when you can expect to be contacted with the results of the competition.

If you are hired, congratulations! Competition for public history positions can be fierce. Before you start, negotiate your salary, starting date, and other benefits. Again, general job search handbooks, as well as the tenure-track section of this book, may be helpful resources. If you have to relocate, be sure to inquire whether the costs of your move will be covered. On the job, you may encounter a variety of workspaces and resources. You may have your own office with a view, you might have a cubicle, or you might share a single large workspace with your co-workers. There may be ample administrative support or none at all. Be prepared for the possibility that you may have to be flexible in your work style. You might be expected to work primarily in a team, respect seemingly arbitrary deadlines, and put in overtime for special events. You may also have little control over your working hours and where you carry out your work. Be sure to ask about your research budget (if you have one), how much it is, and what it may cover in terms of expenses. Ask if you will sometimes be allowed to work from home. Familiarize yourself with your union and its benefits, if you have one.

Most of all, take time to be proud of your success. Working as a public historian can be a rewarding and engaging experience. Like any job, the workload and dynamics can be challenging at times, but the payoff can be greater. Your work may be viewed by hundreds, thousands, and possibly millions of people. You may have the opportunity to shape public opinion and bring to light historical experiences about which few would

otherwise know. Your research may take you to interesting places where you have the opportunity to meet a variety of people. Public history can be an exciting career path for anyone interested in becoming a professional historian.