

CHAPTER FIVE THE CONFERENCE CIRCUIT

Historians do not spend all their time in the archives, library, or microfilm room. They also communicate their findings to other historians and scholars, to students, and the general public. Sharing your research with others can be a very rewarding experience, especially when the audience is engaged by your presentation and people ask you plenty of questions and initiate follow-up conversation. The form of presentation will vary depending upon the venue; the formal paper read at an academic conference, for instance, can be transformed into a more informal but equally valuable talk for a community group. Developing a strong scholarly profile includes getting your research findings out to a wider academic community. This chapter focuses on the academic conference circuit.

Ideally, academic conferences are vehicles for disseminating your research, facilitating intellectual exchange, and forging valuable professional and social networks with peers and established scholars. The relationship between writing thesis chapters and giving conference papers should be a symbiotic one. In the process of drafting a thesis chapter, you may decide the subject matter would work well for a conference paper, or you might first write the conference paper knowing that it will evolve into a thesis chapter. Supervisors who tell their students to complete their dissertation before ever presenting a conference paper or submitting an article for publication are simply out of date. Most candidates on the job market have a published article or two, and a few conference papers on their cv. This will not guarantee that you will get the job. In Canada, we still hear about the "ABD" (all but the dissertation) getting the nod over more senior and published candidates. But it happens infrequently, which is why it is the topic of so much gossip. Such hirings usually mean that the junior candidate really did best "fit" the particular combination of specialties the hiring department expressly prioritized, or are the result of what one history chair aptly described as "the mysterious process called internal departmental politics!" Nevertheless, these days, the successful job candidate usually is someone with a completed PhD, one or two publications, some teaching, and experience on the conference circuit.

Going to Conferences

You should go to conferences but don't fall under the mistaken assumption that you need to attend many of them. Nor should you be giving hastily written papers to umpteen conferences without informing your supervisor – who is actually well-qualified to help you decide whether this is the right paper, right time, and right venue! Presenting at two to four conferences during the course of your PhD studies is certainly sufficient. For senior PhD students nearing completion of the thesis or new scholars, delivering papers at one or two conferences each year is plenty. (Increasingly, MA students deliver papers based on their master's research at graduate student conferences, which can be an important learning experience in giving a public presentation.) Conference papers should evolve into dissertation chapters (or vice versa), or

eventual publications, especially for newly minted PhDs and untenured junior professors. Avoid the trap of writing many conferences papers that then end up in a drawer or a pile on your study floor. Keep in mind that you do not have to write a new paper for each conference. Most historians present papers based on current research; they are "works-in-progress" that might eventually become a scholarly article. It is acceptable to present the same paper in a revised form to several conferences as it develops into a dissertation chapter or publication. But don't do this more than two or three times. Delivering papers that are already very familiar to the audience is usually frowned upon. So, too, is presenting a paper that has already been published. Nor should you deliver a paper that is too sketchy and lacks sufficient evidence to make your case.

Attend a few conferences before actually delivering a paper at one of them, and choose conferences carefully. Make sure that those you attend are relevant to your field of study and will allow you to network with colleagues and senior scholars in your field. The first few conferences may be intimidating. Most historians can tell tales about their early experiences: about finally getting introduced to that prominent historian in your field and then being too nervous to say anything; about convincing yourself you had destroyed your "career" by "putting your foot in your mouth" while talking to an influential scholar; or about simply feeling embarrassed about all those interrupted conversations with people who seemed more keen on talking to someone else. Franca Iacovetta can recall how at her first conference as a graduate student (the Blue Collar Workers' Conference, Hamilton, 1981), she met some of Canada's best known labour historians but couldn't say a word to them because she had laryngitis! She was convinced that they thought she was "an idiot – or worse, quiet and demure." Eventually, they became her friends and colleagues. As a novice, you're supposed to make yourself known to established scholars in your field, but no one knows quite how to do it. It can be as simple as approaching more senior scholars and indicating that you enjoy their work. Ask them about their current research interests. Draw parallels with your own scholarly interests, if this is relevant. Many senior scholars are interested in knowing about graduate students' work. But keep in mind that a conference is not a place for long leisurely conversations: that senior historian you want to meet is extremely busy, so keep it brief and don't be mortified if your conversation ends abruptly. Many established historians make a point of talking to graduate students and junior colleagues, but they may need to hurry off to business meetings and are also seeing friends and colleagues whose company they rarely get a chance to enjoy. Don't be scared off by the few unfriendly ones; they are in the distinct minority. And giving a paper means you may be in the same session as established scholars in your field, which can act as an effective ice-breaker.

There are many practical ways to reduce tension. Attend the first few conferences with a friend, colleague, or group of graduate students. That way you will know some people, can discuss papers and sessions you've heard, and perhaps be emboldened to approach senior colleagues. In Quebec, the Institut d'Histoire de l'Amérique Française (IHAF) welcomes students and its annual meeting provides a good place to mingle with faculty and senior colleagues. Also in Quebec, where many PhD students are linked to faculty-headed research groups that are affiliated with comparable groups in European universities, you may get the opportunity and funds to give a paper at a co-organized conference abroad. This will count as an international

conference. In the case of large organizations that hold annual or regular meetings, such as the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians (the Berks), the Canadian Historical Association, Social Science History Association (SSHA), and American Historical Association, check the conference program for organized meetings or social events by groups you would like to join. These might include a GLBT network, disability studies group, women's and/or gender committee, child and youth group, labour committee, or immigration network. Attending graduate student events at large conferences offers an excellent way of meeting your peers and future co-presenters. Taking time to do at least one or two activities unrelated to the conference – such as visiting a local museum, taking a walk, or even having dinner alone – can also help diffuse stress and make the overall conference experience more enjoyable. Some people thrive amidst the social interaction at conferences and others don't. Whatever your personality, keep it in mind that it will get easier as the conference rituals become familiar. And veterans might well bear this in mind when encountering novices at conferences.

Getting on the Program

Formal sessions usually consist of two or three paper presenters, a chair, and a commentator who is expected to draw a few links between the papers and offer brief but constructive feedback to each presenter. Usually, paper presenters are asked to submit their written papers to their designated commentator a month or so in advance. At the conference, they are given anywhere from 10 to 30 minutes to present a summary of their paper. Conferences also sponsor panels or roundtables on a given subject or controversy. Usually, these include more participants, each of whom speaks briefly to the issue at hand rather than delivering a formal paper. Whatever the format, make sure you follow instructions and stick to time limits.

There are no secrets about how to get on a conference program, though many graduate students think so. One colleague recalled how she spent the first few years in her PhD program wondering when she would get that "invitation" to give a paper at a scholarly conference! Historians often talk about "being invited" to give a conference paper, especially when requesting funds. The letters we receive telling us that our paper proposal has been accepted often use the language and form of an invitation to the conference. In truth, very few people are actually invited to give a paper; this is an honour usually bestowed on senior scholars or historians whose work has made a significant contribution to the profession. For most historians, established or otherwise, getting on the program involves keeping informed about conferences (through journals, the internet, professional mailings, and word-of-mouth), responding to calls for papers, and setting up attractive sessions that program committees will want to accept.

When considering conferences, keep in mind that history conferences and the CHA are not the only game in town; look for thematic and multi-disciplinary conferences in your fields of study. Also, every conference has a different "feel." The big conference has its attractions, but the smaller formats of a regional conference or an occasional conference on a specific theme that bring together specialists from different disciplines can be a more rewarding professional and personal experience. Don't forget to consider non-Canadian conferences, such as the SSHA and

the European Social Science History Conference, as these will enable you to make international contacts. Many conferences offer funding for graduate students, in the form of reduced conference fees or travel grants. Your department or university may also offer travel money to assist with your registration, travel and accommodation costs. In both cases, such funds may be restricted to paper presenters. Don't hesitate to inquire early about the availability of these resources. To qualify, you may have to apply several months in advance of the conference.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of graduate student conferences. These venues help graduate students get over first conference presentation jitters, give them experience at organizing an academic conference, and allow them to meet other students working in their field. The smaller format may also be more conducive for getting to know the invited keynote speaker, who is usually a senior historian. However, you must recognize that graduate student conferences do not have the same status as professional ones and thus have limited cv-building potential. So, strive for balance. Do not become so involved in organizing and attending graduate student conferences year after year that you neglect your thesis. It is important that you attend sooner rather than later the more prestigious professional conferences where you can meet, present with, and get feedback from more established scholars and share your work with a wider audience

Most advertisements announcing conferences come in the form of a Call for Papers (CFP) telling potential participants to submit proposals by a given deadline. These can be found in association newsletters or websites; most are also disseminated via listservs. The CHA, for example, posts its CFP on H-Canada, an H-Net listserv for Canadianists. For some conferences, your chances to present a paper are better if you submit a full session proposal. Other conferences, such as the annual meeting of the IHAF, regularly accept individual papers from graduate students. So, read the CFP carefully and follow instructions and guidelines.

The conference program committee generally seeks to develop a program that is balanced geographically, chronologically and topically, that includes both male and female participants at various stages in their career – although, of course, a conference with a very focused theme may have a less comprehensive line-up. To achieve balance, the committee welcomes proposals from a variety of potential participants. Some committees prefer to select commentators themselves; others gladly take suggestions. Most conferences, including the annual or regular meetings of large organizations, have a few highlighted themes that will also guide the committee's choices – although many papers that do not fit these themes will make the final cut.

In organizing a session, remember that the individual papers should clearly relate to each other and focus on a historically significant problem or topic. Avoid narrowly conceived sessions: only a small number of specialists will want to hear two papers on the same subject. Think broadly and comparatively. Use your session to bring together two or three papers that address the same theme but in different ways, or by considering different time periods, groups, and approaches. For some conferences, such as the Berks, you will be urged to think in international terms. Canadianists should know that an all-Canadian session on an international conference venue rarely attracts more than a few people. For examples of how colleagues have organized

international sessions, consult the past programs of conferences that interest you. They will also give you a good sense of current research interests and emerging fields of study.

Participants

In choosing participants, including presenters, chair, and commentator, keep a few things in mind. Make every effort to balance the panel with regard to gender, rank, region (regarding both subject matter and the historian's residence), race, ethnicity, and type of institution. Put bluntly, no one wants to hear two papers on Toronto delivered by two female friends from the same Toronto university: not even their other Toronto-based colleagues! CHA Council encourages sessions that are not composed entirely of graduate students or otherwise lack a broad cross-section of the profession. If paper presenters are junior colleagues, then at least the commentator, but probably the chair as well, should be a person of established reputation. This will improve your panel's chances of acceptance by the conference organizers. Some programs may have additional rules. For example, the AHA limits the participation of individuals to every other year to encourage fuller participation by all its members. Candidates on the job market in US universities should bear this in mind. It is important to get on the AHA program while on the job market, but you may have to work at meeting the organization's various criteria for ensuring a "balanced" session proposal.

In putting together a session, you probably will need to contact colleagues or professors whom you may not know personally. This can be intimidating, especially for graduate students inviting senior historians outside their institution to join a session proposal. But try to remember that our professional community operates in this fashion, and that you do not need to be a natural networker or a gregarious personality to participate in it. No one will be surprised to be asked to join a session proposal, and most people, even the stars, are flattered by the request. Avoid asking people at the last minute; senior and active historians are busy people and so need advance warning. By the same token, they are busy precisely because they play an active role in the profession at its various levels. So, go ahead and ask. Send them an email with all the necessary information. If colleagues can't or won't do it, most likely they will suggest an alternate.

Submitting the Panel

Make sure you submit a complete and well-conceived proposal. Inevitably, the Call For Papers will come at "a bad time," when you are busy meeting other commitments. Nevertheless, you must take some time to produce an attractive proposal. Typically, a session proposal consists of a short summary or "abstract" of each proposed paper (usually a paragraph), a one-page cv of each participant, including chair and commentator, and a brief explanation of the purpose and significance of the panel. It usually also includes a description of the panel as it would appear in the program, including titles for the session and papers, and the institutional affiliation and rank of each participant. One person involved with the panel usually acts as coordinator, amassing

the required material from each participant, and submitting it to the conference organizers well in advance of the deadline. Most CFPs request that submissions be made electronically (either via email or through an online form).

The conference program committee will keep track of submissions and send copies for appraisal to all or certain designated committee members. Appraisers have to make tough decisions about what to accept and reject. Sometimes they need to find a home for individual papers, and may re-organize your session proposal in order to accommodate a "floating" paper. Do not take rejection of your paper or session as personal or professional rejection. There are many reasons why proposals do not get on the final program. Perhaps your session was not on one of the highlighted themes. Or your topic may have been unusually popular at that meeting, and so you lost to a similarly designed proposal. Your session perhaps failed to offer a broad cross-section of papers and participants. If the proposal is turned down and you are convinced it is a sound plan, consider offering it again the following year, or submitting it for another conference. In any event, be prepared to wait several months after the committee's deadline for final notification of acceptance or rejection, although you may receive word of tentative approval earlier than that.

Performing the Conference Paper

Once you have agreed to participate in a conference session, make every effort to fulfil the agreement. You do not want to develop a reputation for last minute cancellations. However, if certain circumstances prevent your being there, inform your co-panelists and the conference organizers in advance.

If you are to read a conference paper, allow ample time to write the best one you can and practise ahead of time. Normally, you will be told exactly how long your presentation should be, so plan accordingly. You can count on reading a page of approximately 250 words in about two minutes, so keep your paper short enough to stay within the time assigned. The person who chairs the session has the duty to cut off presentations after the allotted time has expired. You don't want to be asked to sit down just before you have reached that eloquent climax. Nor do you want to rush madly through a paper that you know is too long: you will lose your audience.

There may be a difference between your written paper and oral presentation. The former should be written in formal, scholarly style with footnotes and full citations. In some cases, the written version is longer than the oral presentation; in other instances, it is virtually the same. The length is largely determined by conventions within your field and by the requirements of the particular conference program committee. Some conferences ask for a short paper of ten or so pages. In that case, the written and oral versions are effectively the same paper, though the written paper will have all of the academic apparatus (endnotes, bibliography, etc.). If the written version is considerably longer, be sure when writing the summary oral presentation that you hit the highlights. Written papers submitted to the CHA tend to be approximately 25-35 pages, the length of most journal articles, in part because they are considered for possible inclusion in the organization's scholarly journal, *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*. Try to avoid

the mistake of sending a 35-page paper to a commentator expecting to read a 10-12 page one.

If your panel includes a chair and commentator, submit a copy of your written paper to them in advance. If you cannot meet the stipulated deadline, make suitable alternative arrangements. No one wants to hear an annoyed commentator complain about your late paper or ignore it altogether. Commentators do vary in style, flexibility, and degree of preparation. Some want the time to compose a polished critique, others are more casual or flexible about deadlines, though that doesn't mean that the commentary will be casually prepared or presented. You want constructive feedback and intellectual exchange, so do your best to get it. On the other hand, do not get upset if your commentator turns out to be overly harsh. Most commentators offer well-balanced critiques of papers, and those who are overly harsh or unfair actually hurt their own reputations. If that happens, don't get upset or act defensive, but by all means respond forcefully in defense of your research. The same applies to fielding questions from the audience. Accept criticism of your work while also emphasizing your positive contributions.

The oral presentation should be written with a listening audience in mind. Remember: you have little time in which to convince your audience that you are doing interesting and important work, so hit the highlights. Take the time to craft a polished paper that effectively summarizes some main arguments and offers interesting illustrations. Use simpler prose than you would for a written paper you intend to publish; your argument will be easier to follow if your sentences are relatively short and use few subordinate clauses. Avoid the temptation to say too much: do not include too many details, statistics, or disclaimers. This is especially important if you use PowerPoint because it takes more time. Don't let the technology dominate your talk. Too many pictures and too much slide text can be distracting, as can a malfunctioning computer or projector. Be sure to show up early to your session in case any technical problems need to be cleared up, and consider bringing overheads as backup if images are essential. It is perfectly acceptable to assert that the paper covers issues in more detail, or to whet the audience's appetite by focusing on the paper's most dramatic parts or provocative arguments. Of course, you will feel that you have reduced your work to less than a bare bones summary. All of us grow attached to our research (not to mention our phrases and narrative devices!), but you must be brief, clear, and succinct.

Although few people say it, the conference presentation (like the lecture) is also a performance. The quality of your work is the most important thing, but the audience will also evaluate your delivery. Stand, if you can, and if you have special needs (for example, for a microphone), make sure you ask for them in advance. Senior colleagues in departments who are hiring scout out prospective candidates at conferences. Can you write a well-organized talk, and deliver it in a confident and engaging way? Those who are impressed with your performance will want to meet you and possibly invite you to give a talk in their department. Do not underestimate word of mouth. People remember bad performances, whether delivered by a senior historian or a novice. The inequities are such that the senior colleague can afford to blow it occasionally; a graduate student does not have the same luxury. But do not make yourself sick over your first presentation; take precautions (described below) to help you get through the hurdles. And remember what University of Manitoba history professor Adele Perry was told following her

first conference performance: it's over, you will never again have to deliver your first conference paper, and you will be amazed by how much easier the second and third performances will be.

You should practise your conference presentation in advance – and, if possible, before a fairly large audience. This is especially critical for graduate students, but also applies to junior colleagues. You do not want to give a paper prematurely, before you have truly assimilated and distilled your research. Nor do you want to simply present one of your thesis chapters without providing wider context; a detailed discussion of a narrowly defined topic will not engage your audience. Don't put your supervisor in the awful position of trying to convince people that your thesis is far more interesting than your conference paper suggested. It will create enormous pressure on you to do brilliantly the next time.

When giving your paper, remember to perform! Learn to project so that your voice carries and speak in an animated and engaging manner. Look up from your paper, and make eye contact with your audience. Plan to wear an outfit that makes you look and feel both professional and confident. There is no “right” ensemble – some scholars wear suits (conservative or funky) to conference presentations, while others prefer more casual attire. Practise your presentation, but don't over practise. Make sure it fits the time limit the conference mandates. Recruit members of your department to a dry run of your paper (and consider delivering wearing your planned conference attire). Some programs run colloquia or seminar series precisely with this purpose in mind. If not, take advantage of whatever speakers' series your department or school does sponsor, and ask to get on the roster so you will have the opportunity to rehearse your paper before a demanding but sympathetic crowd. Check out similar venues in related programs, such as the History of Science, Medieval Studies, or International Relations. Graduate student conferences (both history-based and multidisciplinary) or small informal conferences offer the same opportunity. In these contexts, let colleagues help you improve the presentation; listen to their advice and be prepared to revise.

Of course, even these rehearsal situations can be stressful. Junior faculty may find this experience especially anxiety producing because it feels like a second job talk or a pre-tenure review. Try to remember that the best criticism often comes from colleagues whose fields and perspectives differ from your own. Also, rehearsals will make the actual performance far less stressful, and you want to perform well. Historians present conference papers for various reasons, including building up your cv, and accumulating credentials. But surely the more important goal is to share your ideas and receive responses to them from an audience of well-informed scholars. Go into your session prepared for this intellectual give-and-take. But also be prepared for no give-and-take. You may find that your session is not well-attended or that you get few (or even no) questions or comments. Don't take it personally. Even if you have a limited audience, deliver your presentation with gusto. Engage with your fellow panellists during the discussion period. You will still get the practise, and the experience will still end up on your cv. Moreover, smaller sessions can actually offer more of the intellectual exchange we desire and facilitate networking.

For a scholar, there is nothing quite so gratifying as to have your work spark animated discussion

and exchange. When it happens, enjoy it!