

CONFERENCE REPORT

What Futures for the Pillar of Geography? A Report on the 16th International Conference of Historical Geographers, London

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Likewise, where historical geography once seemed almost synonymous with geography tout court, today it is a fairly small subfield of diminished intellectual influence.

- Noel Castree¹

On a hot Sunday afternoon in July 2015, more than 730 historical geographers gathered at the Royal Geographical Society, London. This marked the start of the fabulous 16th International Conference of Historical Geographers (ICHG). Hailing from over forty countries, the delegates were resolutely international, and the audible voices and discussions reflected this. All of them, though, had reason to view the future with trepidation, because although they were gathered to mark the conference's 40th anniversary, they had all heard versions of Castree's taunt.

In the opening plenary session on the international dimensions of historical geography, Alan Baker discussed the history of the ICHG and a related institution, the *Journal of Historical Geography*, both founded in 1975. The first British-Canadian Symposium on Historical Geography was held at Queens University, Kingston, Ontario, in fall 1975 and dealt with settler colonialism in Canada.² The idea for the Canadian meeting was, according to Baker, first suggested at the Annual Conference of the Institute of British Geographers at Birmingham in 1973. The fraternity and hospitality of those early meetings is an important tradition and evident influence on the composition of the ICHG today. The contributions of key figures in the ICHG's evolution, like Alan Baker and Graeme Wynn, were appropriately recognized and honored through the conference programme.

Baker's retrospective was not entirely surprising: in any discussion amongst Anglo-American historical geographers, it is never long before they recall the halcyon days of the 1970s. For much of the authors' education as historical geographers in the late 1990s and early 2000s, we learned about this period and that things would never get that good again. But from what we saw at the 16th ICHG, the best days for historical geography appear to be in the present and the future.

Forty years ago, historical geography at the ICHG focused almost exclusively on settler

colonialism in the British Empire and to lesser extent France. It was limited in its ambition but careful and consolidated. Now, it is evident that although much expanded, the concerns of the field are also more divergent. British historical geography and North American historical geography seem to have followed different paths over the past decade or so. In Britain, there has been a recent rapprochement with cultural geography, and important work has been pursued on the historical geography of collections, instruments and cultural practices.³ By contrast, significant contributions by historical geographers in the U.S. and Canada have remained closer to debates in environmental history and in the application of spatial technologies to economic and social history.⁴ But these are no longer the only debates in town – if, indeed, they ever were. Conversations at the ICHG also involved trends in Brazilian historical geography, and the differences between geographical history and historical geography in Chinese discourse, as well as tropes more familiar to Anglophone ears.

Forty years ago, almost all historical geographers at the ICHG were men. In her response to Baker's address, Laura Cameron noted that just two women were present at the inaugural Kingston gathering. In doing so, she welcomed any 'outsiders' and 'gate-crashers' to the ICHG and wondered what conversations might ensue. Mona Domosh, in her plenary comments, mentioned that back in 2004, she had noted the death of American historical geography in Philadelphia: "Now, it's back!" she said. Indeed, a major strength of American human geography over the past decade has been feminist historical geography. Three of its leading practitioners, Mona Domosh, Karen Morin and Tamar Rothenberg, organized three sessions on the topic at this ICHG. These sessions were sponsored by our journal, *Historical Geography*, and followed by a reception at a nearby pub.⁵

While there were too many sessions to describe here, a number of themes stood out. There were fascinating sessions on "Technology, Nature and War," "Geographical Traditions," "Historical Geographies of Making," "Geography and Enlightenment," and "Histories of Geographies and Geographers." Lunchtime discussions on teaching historical geography were also seamlessly integrated into the program.

Another prominent motif was historical geographies of weather and climate. Sessions covered such topics as cultural memories of extreme weather events, climate vulnerability in Latin America, and the use of documentary data to reconstruct past climates. No doubt, growing concerns about anthropogenic climate change have raised the prominence of such work. Just a few days before the conference began, England experienced its hottest day for a decade. Such searing heat made the papers here seem all the more topical.

The conference organizers chose three visiting plenary speakers to reflect the sibling disciplines of imperial history (Catherine Hall), history of science (Simon Schaffer), and environmental history (William Cronon). Catherine Hall gave a powerful plenary lecture on the legacies of slave ownership for British society and economy today. Simon Schaffer presented a dazzling account of the links between the history of astronomy and the history of empire in an argument about the science of coincidence. In a resolutely historical geographical account, he demonstrated that colonial cultures were founded upon *metis*. All of the three main plenary speakers made reference to the debt of learning they owed to historical geographers. William Cronon, in particular, was grateful to geography's 'capacious tent.'⁶ Perhaps they knew their audience, but there is no doubting the energizing impact these events had on the community.

Unlike Hall or Schaffer, Cronon used his lecture as an opportunity to reflect on the digital revolution and how its tumultuous changes are affecting historical scholarship and reading more generally. Among all the sub-fields of geography, historical geography is probably the most book-oriented. Compared to our colleagues in other parts of geography, historical geographers tend to write books and read more of them. Yet what, Cronon asked, is the fate of the book and this sort

of scholarly “product” in our digital age? What will become of long-form reading—of fiction, nonfiction, and historical geography—as people’s reading occurs more via tablets and smart phones than physical books?

Notwithstanding these concerns, Cronon ended on a positive note: “Leaning in to stories and maps is how we can navigate the digital world.” With its commitment to storytelling, maps, and rich description, historical geography is perhaps better positioned to cope with these changes than other fields. Despite the many ways that the digital revolution has reshaped our lives, the desire of people for incisive historical stories well told has not abated. And of course, the digital world lends itself to employing and displaying the sorts of maps, images, and other spatial visualizations geographers have so long used.

Moreover, digital connectedness means some of our readers might already know much about ICHG 2015 already, not because they attended, but because they followed the conference via social media such as podcasts, Facebook, and Twitter—including a welcome, if disconcerting, gatecrasher, @GeographyFly.

Indeed this journal, in a small way, is also a part of the digital revolution Cronon described. Two years ago, *Historical Geography* migrated to a digital platform, partly as a cost-saving move. In becoming an online publication, though, opportunities are afforded that were difficult to imagine when the journal appeared only in print. In its new digital form, *Historical Geography* is less restricted by word count and is able to publish more and richer color images than it could before, and the journal editors and editorial board are exploring new creative ways to make the most of this digital medium.

After the conference, there was an exciting program of fieldtrips considering *inter alia* the geographies of Kent, Oxford, Soho and East London, a range of repositories and museums, and a final, extended trip to the Cotswolds and Welsh Marches. There was warm hospitality throughout, with delegates enjoying the receptions, lunches and a conference dinner. The conference organization was excellent, with the various international and local committees interacting perfectly. The local team of Nicola Thomas, Charlie Withers and Felix Driver must be thanked for delivering professionally and with great humor. Catherine Souch and her team at the RGS also deserve acclaim for facilitating a conference of this length and size so smoothly.

One of the striking features of the audiences and debates at this ICHG was their lack of parochialism. The global reach of historical geographers was particularly manifest. Certain sites and institutions still produce among the best historical geography, but it is refreshing to hear so many emergent voices from across the world. At the final session, Warsaw, Poland was chosen by delegates over St. Petersburg, Russia, as the location for the ICHG 2018. In short, the global vitality, expanded membership and intellectual integrity of historical geography in the contemporary, for us, were heartening. And its concerns in their breadth and their diversity remain synonymous with geography. Tout court.

NOTES

- 1 Noel Castree, “Commentary: Charles Darwin and the Geographers,” *Environment and Planning A* 41 (2009): 2295.
- 2 Laura Cameron, “Recollecting 1975: The British-Canadian Symposium on Historical Geography in Kingston, Ontario,” *NICHE Blog*, February 18, 2013, <http://niche-canada.org/2013/02/18/recollecting-1975-the-british-canadian-symposium-on-historical-geography-in-kingston-ontario/>.
- 3 See, for instance, Felix Driver, “Hidden Histories Made Visible? Reflections on a Geographical Exhibition,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38 (2013): 420-435; Sarah Louise Millar, “Science at Sea: Soundings and Instrumental Knowledge in British

Polar Expedition Narratives, c.1818-1848," *Journal of Historical Geography* 42 (2013): 77-87; and Fraser Macdonald, "The Ruins of Erskine Beveridge," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 39 (2014): 477-489.

- 4 For examples here, see Stéphane Castonguay and Matthew Evenden, eds., *Urban Rivers: Remaking Rivers, Cities and Space in Europe and North America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012); K. Maria D. Lane, "Water, Technology, and the Courtroom: Negotiating Reclamation Policy in Territorial New Mexico," *Journal of Historical Geography* 37 (2011): 300-311; Anne Kelly Knowles, *Mastering Iron: The Struggle to Modernize an American Industry, 1800-1868* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
- 5 Some of these papers will be published next year as a special issue of *Historical Geography*.
- 6 William Cronon, "Who Reads Geography or History Anymore? The Challenge of Audience in a Digital Age," (Lecture in Geography, British Academy, July 7, 2015). Available at http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/2015/Who_reads_Geography_or_History_Anytime.cfm. Cronon's talk was also notable as it was the inaugural British Academy (BA) Lecture in Geography, and was cross-listed as a BA event in the ICHG programme. In this way, historical geography was given prominence amongst the fellowship of the BA, as well as the wider geographical public. Certainly, Cronon drew a significant audience to the Ondaatje Lecture Theatre at the Royal Geographical Society from beyond solely the attendees of the ICHG.