

# Training Tomorrow's Historians

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New scholars crave experience. Opportunities to present and publish are invaluable assets to developing graduate students seeking to hone their professional skills and engage with a broad academic audience. Consideration of these needs lay at the heart of two new initiatives undertaken in the University of Toronto's History Department over the past year: organization of the M.A. Symposium and the publication of *Past Tense: Graduate Review of History*.

Held for the first time in May 2012, the symposium allowed Master's students, their fellow graduate students and faculty members a chance to gather for a day of presentations given by graduate students at the very earliest stage of their academic careers. As a co-organizer and participant in the M.A. Symposium, I had an opportunity to gain experience planning a small conference, practice my own presentation skills, and observe the event's impact upon myself and my fellow Master's students. Our goal as organizers was to afford Master's students an opportunity to present their 2000 Paper, the major research component of the Master's program. The 2000 Paper is an article length essay, requiring use of original primary source research. We invited participants to share twenty-minute long presentations detailing the main arguments and methodology which informed their 2000 Paper. Ten Master's students presented at the Symposium.

Roughly twenty PhD students and ten faculty members, some of whom were participants' supervisors, attended various presentations throughout the day. This was quite a respectable turn-out, particularly given the fact that the symposium was held on a Friday in late-May! The symposium was a sort of hybrid, somewhere between a formal conference and a workshop, where both questions and suggestions from the audience were encouraged. The presentations were diverse in topic and form. Panellists addressed a wide variety of topics including European and American nationality and immigration history, Canadian studies, gender history and historical memory. The symposium's purpose was twofold. At the most basic level, the meeting represented an opportunity for Master's students, many of whom had never participated in a formal conference, a chance to practice their speaking skills before an audience larger than a standard graduate seminar. In addition, the symposium allowed students to experiment with and rehearse their ideas and findings while collecting valuable feedback and input from their peers.

We never intended to mimic the structure or tone of a formal conference.

Instead, we attempted to create an atmosphere that was both relaxed and intellectually stimulating, a space where conversation was as important as the presentations themselves. In our initial discussions about the symposium's format, we debated whether participants would deliver their presentations from a lectern or remain seated. Our "sit or stand" dilemma, while seemingly trivial, actually speaks volumes about the tone that we were attempting to impart to the symposium. We decided to have panellists remain seated, in order to encourage a more relaxed atmosphere, an environment which was more in keeping with the symposium's goals. Without negating the importance of a formal conference, and the invaluable skills which academics refine while preparing for and taking part in these events, I would suggest that our M.A. Symposium and graduate conferences in general, provide a different, yet equally valuable sort of preparation for developing scholars. As an initiative generated within the graduate community itself, the organization of and participation in the M.A. Symposium and similar graduate conferences attests to graduate students' commitment to creating opportunities for themselves. Graduate conferences indicate the presence of young scholars who take a pro-active approach to their own development as academics. For emerging scholars, events like the M.A. Symposium function as a stepping-stone to larger conferences. Our key motivation in designing the symposium was to provide Master's students with an opportunity to practice, to start working out the kinks in our individual presentation styles before we attempt larger, formal conferences. We believed that a less intimidating environment was the ideal space in which to undertake this sort of training. The symposium's informal character and relatively small size encouraged open, collaborative discussion, conversation which made presenters more comfortable with a conference-like setting and more engaged with their fellow graduate students. Spaces devoted to open conversation and constructive criticism are important for both developing scholars and experienced academics. The M.A. Symposium provided this type of environment.

The process of organizing the symposium led my co-organizers and me to develop a deeper appreciation for the labour that goes into structuring an academic conference, work which was simultaneously anxiety-provoking and gratifying. The formation of panels was a particularly arduous task. The diverse range of topics investigated in our participants' 2000 Papers presented us with a challenge that morphed into an opportunity. In the absence of a pre-set theme to our symposium, we were required to develop panels consisting of presentations which, at first glance, were seemingly unrelated. We realized that looking for common themes, rather than geographical or temporal consistency between presentations in a given panel, produced groups composed of presentations whose differences were assets. Seemingly unrelated topics often inform each other in unexpected ways. This

tendency was most evident in a panel entitled “Myth, Memory and Representation,” which demonstrated the way in which histories of early modern Venice, post-Depression America, and modern Chinese-Canadian migrants inform one another. Though unrelated in geographical or temporal focus, the presentations were united by their meditations upon modes of historical myth and memory, and illuminated the similarities and differences between the manner and function of historical memory in different contexts. Thinking in terms of theme rather than geographic or temporal similarity produced panels which were as entertaining as they were informative.

The symposium itself served as a practice arena, giving participants the chance to refine the content of their major research papers and sharpen their presentation skills. I found my own presentation at the symposium extremely valuable. My peers had similar experiences. Preparation for the symposium inspired many participants to consider more carefully the aims and implications of their research. I have learned that I often do not really know what I wish to communicate until I am forced to articulate my argument within a confined amount of space. The constraints of a twenty-minute presentation forced me to sift carefully through historiographic material and primary source evidence and extract only the most salient pieces of evidence necessary to illustrate my thesis. This exercise allowed me to develop a more concise understanding of my own argument and identify which portions of my research were extraneous. The result was a more concrete conceptualization of my research project. Reactions to the presentations offered many participants new insights into their own research. Colleagues’ generous contributions proved invaluable in producing more nuanced and well-rounded final products. Participants whose supervisors attended the symposium were essentially permitted an opportunity to rehearse a first draft of their 2000 Paper before the faculty member who would judge the final product. This experience undoubtedly allowed presenters to feel more confident about the content of their paper. Most of the presenters completed their projects in advance of the official deadline, and some are now in the process of refining their pieces for submission to academic journals.

Many presenters, including myself, had no experience presenting at a conference. In the most simplistic sense, the symposium was an exercise in managing nerves. I was extremely nervous before presenting, as were most of my peers. I was reassured by the fact that those twinges of anxiety quickly evaporated once I began speaking, a lesson that will make future presentations easier. Most importantly, the symposium gave us practice with defending an argument in a short period of time, a skill valuable for both academic and non-academic jobs where clarity and persuasiveness are key assets. New graduate students, particularly those becoming familiar with the mechanics of grant writing and PhD proposals, quickly learn that

brevity is integral. As I prepare my PhD applications, I am grateful for the training in conveying a complex argument in a limited space that the symposium gave me. Similarly, the symposium provided participants an opportunity to practice developing arguments comprehensible to both specialists and non-specialists. The ability to communicate an idea effectively to a diverse audience is integral to successful grant-writing, like SSHRC proposals, and PhD applications. For those presenters, like myself, intent on pursuing a career in academia, the symposium also offered us early experience in developing skills transferable to teaching. Given the benefits that my peers and I derived from the first M.A. Symposium, I sincerely hope that future Master's cohorts choose to organize a similar event annually.

In many ways, the editorial team's intent at *Past Tense* echoes that of the M.A. Symposium's organizers. While the symposium provided new graduate students with experience as presenters, the journal seeks to afford new scholars with experience as published authors. The journal is first and foremost a forum for emerging scholars to disseminate their research to a wider audience while gaining experience with the publication process in the early stages of their academic careers. An understanding of the mechanics inherent in writing, submitting and refining an essay or book review for publication is integral in any academic profession. *Past Tense* affords new scholars practice with this process.

*Past Tense* offers readers a unique opportunity to visit the sites of inquiry and reflect upon the concerns which animate and inform emerging scholars' works. The pieces selected for the journal's first edition represent an eclectic blend of topics which demonstrate the diverse lines of historical inquiry pursued by new scholars. In a sense, the journal provides a snapshot of history's future, a glimpse into the ways in which old paradigms and new trends are informing developing scholars' approaches. Historians are by nature preoccupied with continuity and change. *Past Tense* allows readers insight into the ways in which continuity and change are shaping modern scholarship. The journal offers more experienced scholars a chance to consider the ways in which new academics are approaching old questions and formulating new inquiries, engaging with established arguments and offering novel interpretations. Thus, while creating a space devoted to the early works of tomorrow's historians, the journal offers readers an opportunity to meet the scholars who will shape the discipline's future.

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