

Update for Congress 2009: “Authority in the Past, Authority of the Past”

As we reach another milestone, the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association becomes a little clearer. The inspiring but also terribly difficult process of evaluating proposals and drawing up a program is now complete. The core theme of the CHA meeting seems to have struck a chord and our program is littered with the concept of “authority”. We have an opportunity to open up some exciting discussions about different forms of authority, different practices that lay claim to be “authoritative”, and how we might navigate our archives with a heightened self-awareness regarding both authority in the past and authority of the past. Session and paper titles will signal where some of our discussions might be headed but I also hope the site and timing of our meeting is a dimension of all this. We shall be meeting in very difficult times for so many, both here in Canada and across the world. As some of the pillars of modern authority start to crumble, we historians might want to think about how we got here, but also how the here and now looks in (and at) the mirror of the past. Sitting in a capital city of one of the world’s G8 nation-states perhaps makes these discussions all the more urgent.

As Program Chair, one of my tasks is to make these conversations possible and, if I do my job well, even necessary. We are therefore extending the time between sessions (but, alas, with the same amount of baked goods!) to 30 minutes from the traditional 15 minutes as a way to allow our discussions in the sessions to bleed into the hallways, to allow people to find a quiet place and put their heads together should they choose, or to revel in the wonderful symphony of voices that always fill up the CHA hallways. We have also cleared the program on Tuesday afternoon to allow us all to gather for an afternoon and evening together. First will be our major plenary session (“Canadians and their Pasts”). Following a refreshment break, we will then assemble for our formal meeting which, this year, includes Craig Heron’s Presidential Address. Finally, we shall follow a pied piper and make our way to the major social event of the conference: an evening of food, drink, a celebration of our annual award winners, and then, in all its glory, Cliopalooza where we shall bust our moves on the dance floor. (In fine postmodern fashion, ironic dancing will be welcomed on the floor!)

I would also like to send out my thanks to a group of scholars who deserve acknowledgement. More than one-in-four proposals were unable to be accommodated on the program, and this has proven to be a rather depressing experience for me as Program Chair. Telling so many smart people, with smart proposals, that we simply could not find a place for them on the program is a testament to the vitality and depth of the CHA. And thanks to the generosity and professionalism of our members, all have received their disappointing news with grace and understanding. While it does not mitigate the disappointment, it has allowed me to start sleeping again at night. Thank you.



Whether one is presenting a paper, chairing a session, or attending as an audience member, I hope this year’s conference is memorable and inspiring. It has already been these things for me. I look forward to welcoming all of you to Carleton in late May.

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